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# FAITH

BY

DON ARMANDO PALACIO VALDÉS

TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY

ISABEL F. HAPGOOD

NEW YORK

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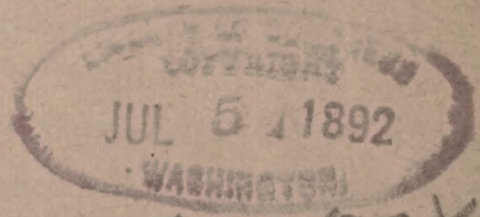
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# FAITH.

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## I.

NOT another person could be contained in the church. To tell the truth, it would not have contained even those who were within it, had each one of them occupied the space which, by natural right, the right which nature teaches all animals, belonged to him. But, at that moment, not only was this right infringed, but the law of impenetrability of bodies was violated in the most barefaced manner. Don Peregrín Casanova, a person of importance in the town, and who, up to that time, had rigorously observed the law on all solemn occasions, profane as well as religious, now had the knees of another rational biped, six feet in height, thrust into his loins, which caused him convulsive movements in the stomach, and a lively sense of uneasiness, accompanied by a profuse perspiration. Doña Teodora, a maiden lady of fifty summers, very modest, very neat, very pretty, who all her life had avoided contact of every sort, saw herself obliged to feel upon her the feet of Osuna the humpback, a person of the most evil antecedents, who would not remain quiet for a moment. Don Gaspar de Silva, a poet



who was famous in town as much for his corns as for his verses, underwent the Cæsarian operation, performed with great dexterity upon one of them by the eldest son of Doña Trinidad. In like manner, another party of respectable neighbors experienced annoyances without number on that memorable morning, on which a young man of their town intoned the mass for the first time.

As is always the case, there were exceptions for the favored. In a privileged position, between the wooden railing and the altar, stood not only the godmother of the priest and the ladies who had paid for his education, but others who were countenanced by no right whatever; and what is most worthy of censure, some of these persons were men. The new clergyman was almost a child in appearance; he had blue eyes, deep and melancholy, a skin as white and pearly as that of a woman, fair hair, a slender, delicate body. Emotion now rendered him very pale; this made his spiritual countenance more interesting. The rector of Peñascosa and Don Narciso, a bold chaplain, a native of Sarrió, who had been several years in town, assisted him in the capacity of deacon and sub-deacon.

A dull murmur resounded through the church, caused by the whispers of the women disputing with each other over places, or communicating to each other their impressions, and by the exclamations and sighs of discomfort arising from the men. The heat grew more intolerable every moment. D. Peregrín gave vent through his trumpet-like nostrils



to some snorts resembling those of a locomotive, and raised himself on the tips of his toes, without succeeding in seeing anything. If he had only possessed the stature of his brother Juan! But the latter, who might just as well have stood behind, was perfectly accommodated in the chancel, between the curates, the mayor, and several members of the council, which aroused in his heart a violent feeling of envy that suffocated him even more than the knees of the robust person who stood behind him. Such was his fate. Although he considered himself much more intelligent than his brother, and had served for many years in the public administration of various provinces in Spain, and had read César Cantú's "Universal History," and Lafuente's "History of Spain," without skipping a single volume, and possessed the same amount of fortune, with the additional pension of 2500 pesetas a year, it is a fact that D. Juan, without ever having quitted Peñascosa, or having read anything in his life beyond the periodical to which he was a subscriber, enjoyed much more prestige in the town. This, in the opinion of D. Peregrín, proceeded from nothing but his stature. In fact, D. Juan Casanova was a tall, lank man, with an aquiline nose, large eyes with drooping lids and an imposing glance, a venerable bald spot, short white whiskers, and a measured and majestic gait. These extraordinary gifts, united to a measured and prudent manner of speech, had secured him the respect and even the veneration of his fellow-townsmen. Great, then, was the amazement of the latter when, on the arrival of D. Peregrín



from Andalucía, where he had lately been employed, they heard him call his brother ignorant and stupid, in a discussion in which he took part at the club concerning the tax on tobacco. They lived together, both being bachelors, and delivered over to the despotic care of Doña Mariquita, their house-keeper and absolute master of their lives and property.

Don Juan, by dint of casting his severe and majestic glance over the sea of heads, which extended from the railing to the door of the temple, hit upon the shining bald spot of his pigmy of a brother. Perceiving the suffering depicted in the latter's countenance, he hastened nobly to make signs to him that he should advance, offering him a seat on the bench which he occupied. But D. Peregrín, chancing to notice the impossibility of taking a single step, or suffocated with the wrath which had been gradually increasing, responded with an angry and disdainful grimace, which surprised his unhappy brother, and completely deprived him of any desire to insist.

"What is it?" inquired D. Martín de las Casas, who sat on his left. "Does not D. Peregrín wish to come?"

"He sees that it is impossible. Who could break through that wall of flesh?"

"Anybody. You shall see how I will go thither and fetch him back with me," replied D. Martín, a man of energetic character and fertile in expedients, preparing to rise. D. Juan held him back by his coat sleeve.



"No; let him alone. Perhaps he does not wish to come. You know his character."

"But, my dear fellow, 'tis no dainty dish to stand there sweating coffee with milk!" he replied with asperity, shrugging his shoulders.

The church was one of the most spacious to be seen in a town. The truth is that Peñascosa, although it contains seven or eight thousand souls, has no other temple than this. Possibly, on account of its being extremely spacious, the sacristan and his assistants do not wish to undertake the task of cleaning it in detail. Its aspect is murky and dirty. From its walls, which have not been whitewashed for many years, hang chains, somber and bunglingly made frames, a multitude of legs, arms, heads in yellow wax, and still another and greater mass of little barks and boats, which the faith of the sailors or their families have brought hither in memory of some danger miraculously avoided. But, in honor of the function which was being celebrated, it had been adorned, so far as was possible. Garlands of flowers surrounded the principal altars, which were covered with freshly ironed white cloths. Some large curtains had been hung upon the panels of the wall in the vicinity of the chief altar, and a part of the floor had been covered with the carpet, dirty and torn in many places, which had shone on solemn occasions for the last forty years. Doña Eloisa, the godmother of the new priest, and the ladies who had seconded her in her efforts to furnish him with a career, had added some dainty trifles to the rough routine adornments of the sacristan. Huge bunches of



flowers, placed in artistic vases, taken from the best houses in town, damask curtains forming a pavilion over the altar, candelabras, and chandeliers. Naturally, the point to which they had directed their special attention and efforts was the dress of the young priest. An alb, of the finest batiste, exquisitely embroidered; a stole; a chasuble of the richest cloth of gold which could be found in the capital; a chalice, also of gold, with several precious stones. The generous ladies had not begrudged their money to complete or crown the work of charity in which they had been engaged for many years.

Everyone in town remembered it, some through having been present, others through having heard it frequently narrated. A little more than twenty years before, there had been in Peñascosa a deep-sea fisherman named Mariano Lastra, whom all his comrades esteemed for his honorable sentiments and his peaceable character. This fisherman perished, with eight others of the crew of the launch in which he was, in consequence of a mild breeze of small importance. Mariano had married two years previously, and left a child a few months old. The widow was a good and honorable young woman, but with scant disposition for work, and, moreover, she did not enjoy much health. She was hard put to it to subsist. The child was a great hindrance in any sort of labor. She devoted herself to working about in houses, discharging the lowest and most menial of offices, fetching water and scrubbing the floors, doing errands, the only thing which she was capable of doing, since she



knew no craft. But the time came when her strength deserted her; her health, each day more frail, rendered her useless for work. She was discharged from several houses. Others continued to employ her out of charity, although less frequently. She and her child began to suffer hunger.

One day she was discharged from the only house where she still helped.

"Basilisa," the lady said to her, "you can no longer fetch water and scrub floors. You are killing yourself, yet you do not succeed in doing your work as you should. I must find another helper. I should be very glad to continue to employ you, but I am not rich, as you know. We have many expenses."

"Yes, Señora; yes, I understand," replied the unhappy woman, with a humble and forced smile. "You have done too much for me."

She quitted this house, her last refuge, with heart distressed and trembling limbs. She reached the wretched hut which she inhabited in the suburbs. Her son, in his cradle, was sleeping the sweet and serene sleep of the angels. The wretched woman fell on her knees and sobbed for a long time. Raising her head at last, she said to herself, as she gazed on her child:

"No, you shall not go to the almshouse."

Several of her acquaintances, and even one lady, had advised her to do this; but the idea of abandoning her son to the hands of sordid women and brutal employees had always inspired her with horror. She had struggled bravely so long as she was able,



often depriving herself of necessary sustenance in order that she might feed her child, who was now about three years of age. Nevertheless, she had come to the end of her combat, and she had been vanquished. The only resource left to her was to beg alms; but, in addition to the terror which this caused her, she comprehended very well that her days were numbered. And when she was dead, what would become of this little creature?

She meditated for a space, her dry eyes riveted upon her child, repeating from time to time the same phrase:

“You shall not go to the almshouse!”

She soon rose, animated by a fatal determination, kissed her son passionately, until she waked him, wrapped him up in a mantle, and, taking him in her arms, left the house.

It was the twilight hour. From the height of the Gusanera, where Basilisa lived, the fishing boats could already be seen approaching the pier. A crowd was waiting for them. Many people were also hastening across the square, and along the broad street which runs from it to the church, on the seashore. Basilisa directed her steps to the highway of Rodillero, which skirts the opposite shore of the little cove directly facing Peñascosa, and hastened on, almost at a run.

“Why do you run, mamma? Whither are we going?” asked the child, caressing her face with his tiny hands.

“We are going to heaven, my darling,” replied the unhappy woman, her eyes clouded with tears.



"Are we going with papa?"

She could not answer; a lump came in her throat.

"Are we going with papa?" the little boy persisted.

She halted a moment to regain her breath.

"Yes, we are going to see him, my pet," she said at length. "Don't you wish to go to heaven with him?"

"No; I wish to be with you."

And at the same time he pressed her neck with his loving arms, and covered her face with kisses.

"Why do you cry, mamma?" he asked, surprised to taste the bitterness of her tears on his lips. "Is anything the matter with you? Take my trumpet."

And he offered her one of lead, which had cost Basilisa two cuartos. Gil did not understand existence unless entangled with something, and he thought that the greatest misfortune which could weigh upon a human being was to have his hands empty.

His mother clasped him to her breast, showered his rosy cheeks with kisses, and continued her course. On arriving at a certain spot, where the highway parted from the shore to turn inland, she quitted it and took a little path which led to the sea. She reached the lofty and gloomy cliffs which surround it at this point. She laid her son on the ground, and, kneeling down, she uttered a prayer between repressed sobs, which could not have reached the ear of the Most High, since it was not directed in proper form.

Night had almost completely fallen. The sea



lay motionless, dark, waiting for the tears of this unhappy woman to come, like so many others, to augment the bitter abundance of its waves. On the further side of the cove, the silhouette of the pier was visible, and of three or four tenders which usually lay at anchor near it. The group of fishing boats, a little distance off, was in motion, and already resounded with the cries of the women who were busy slitting up the fish, while their husbands were already resting gravely in some tavern of the town. Basilisa listened a moment to these familiar sounds. She, too, had waited for her husband in former days, and caressed him with her glance on his arrival; had taken from his hand his waterproof coat, his box of implements, and his basket of provisions, and carried them cheerfully home. Mariano arrived shortly after, and seated himself close to the fire, dandling in his arms the delicate child, which was only a few months old.

The widow remained for a long time gazing attentively at the group on the shore, which now appeared like a formless and motionless mass. Her son, seated on the turf, amused himself by filling his trumpet with dirt. She soon came to him, took him in her weak arms, and ran toward the brink of the precipice.

“Mamma, where are we going?” screamed the child.

The reply, if she made one, must have been to heaven. She leaped violently to the bottom of the abyss. In her fall upon the rocks of the shore her skull was shattered; she was killed. The child was



miraculously saved. The bosom from which he had sprung now served him as an elastic support, and prevented his being dashed to pieces.

An aged sailor, who was passing along among these cliffs in search of cuttle-fish, heard the crash and rendered the first succor to the child. He ran to give information; the spot was soon swarming with people. The event produced a deep impression. The women wept and passed the tender child from hand to hand, lavishing upon him a thousand caresses. Many offered to adopt him, and a dispute arose as to who should take him. When the ladies of the town were informed, they were much affected, and also desired to take charge of the orphan. The wives of the fishermen then renounced their claim on him in the interest of the latter. Accordingly, he remained in the care of Doña Eloisa, the wife of D. Martín de las Casas, seconded by six or eight other dames, who would not hear of giving up participation in so charitable a work.

The childhood of Gil (for that was the orphan's name), if it was not happy, was certainly not unhappy. His protectresses exercised over him a vigilance which was somewhat impertinent at times, and also rather humiliating, but always affectionate and well meaning. Although Doña Eloisa took the principal part in it, they all united to pay for his board and rearing in the house of a married artisan who lived in the Gusanera, near the house in which the unhappy widow had dwelt. When he had attained the proper age they sent him to school. He



gave signs of being a peaceable, reserved, sensible child, and began to learn his lessons very well. His seven or eight mammas took it upon themselves to question the teacher concerning his conduct and application every time that they met him in the street, encouraging him to "tighten the thumb-screws." The master did, in fact, make a point of tightening them, reminding him at the same time, incessantly, in the presence of his fellow-students, of his orphaned state, his wretched condition, and the inevitable necessity he was under of showing himself humble and grateful to his benefactresses. This humility was a thing which they never ceased to sing in his hearing in the town. Everyone who met him in the street, and condescended to lay his hand paternally on his head, said to him :

"Take care to be humble, be obedient, and submissive to the ladies who have taken charge of you through charity ; do you hear? Through charity."

And finally his school-fellows took it upon themselves to admonish him constantly that he was an unfortunate wretch, without parents, fed by charity, and that he ought to be in the almshouse, not associating with the sons of distinguished tailors, masons, shoemakers, and fashionable bakers, and other people no less prominent and worthy of respect.

The son of the drowned man and the woman-suicide had humility in his heart, and if he had not had it, it would not have been easy to inculcate it upon him with the jests and scorn of his companions, or the paternal blows of the master and of his



protectresses; for all these persons considered that they had a right to love him, but to castigate him as well. His was a grateful and affectionate nature. He understood that he owed all his protectresses respect and affection, and he paid them this tribute. It was clear that, in the bottom of his heart, he felt preferences; this is irremediable. He loved Doña Eloisa passionately. This good woman, to whom he owed the most, never scolded or punished him; nor even said an unpleasant word to him; she treated with extreme gentleness, caressed him as though he were her son, and concealed or excused his petty pranks.

When he reached the age of twelve, the ladies assembled in council, and deliberated as to what was to be done with the lad. The idea of dedicating him to his father's trade was unanimously rejected. They considered various others, without coming to any agreement, until Doña Trinidad, the wife of D. Ramigio Flórez, manufacturer of nutritious preserves, proposed to take him to their house in the capacity of errand boy. Nearly all assented to this proposition but Doña Eloisa, who was pained by it, representing to her friends that the lad had displayed aptitude for study, and that it would be a meritorious work to make a priest of him. The ladies adopted the idea with enthusiasm. Doña Trinidad alone, a very punctilious person, who lived to impose her will upon all the world, opposed it strongly, and withdrew in disgust from the meeting. The ladies dispensed with her consent, and settling upon a monthly sum, which they would



contribute in shares, they dispatched the lad to the seminary of Lancia, the capital of the province where we find ourselves.

Gil was a model seminarist, industrious, gentle, respectful, given to religious exercises, and exhibiting much fervor therein. The ladies found no occasion to do otherwise than congratulate themselves on their decision. When he came to pass his vacations at Peñascosa, he brought with him for each of them a card from the rector, testifying to the latter's satisfaction with the conduct and progress of the orphan. During the two or three months which he spent there, he rendered them various services, reviewing lessons with their sons, accompanying them in their prayers, or serving as their amanuensis, and so on. He lived in Doña Eloisa's house. Every summer he underwent a little change; the youth was gradually transformed into a man. At last he omitted to come for three consecutive years, for the purpose of taking the final orders. The moment arrived for him to become a priest. When he made his appearance at length, one day, at Peñascosa, in the garb of a priest, his presence caused a profound emotion in the hearts of his protectresses. All considered themselves as his mothers, and consequently authorized to weep with joy, and to fall affectionately into his arms. It is certain that these caressing unbosomings of affection gave rise to some altercations among them, because those who had shown themselves the least loving and tolerant toward the child were the most extreme now with the man. This annoyed Da. Eloisa,



Da. Teodora, and Da. Marciala, who had always treated him with gentleness, and even with fondness.

The preparations for the first mass began. A strife of daintiness arose among them. Those who were rich, like Da. Eloisa and Da. Teodora, undertook to purchase the chalice and more costly articles. Those who were of moderate fortune, like Da. Rita, Da. Filomena, and others, made up for the lack of money by the skill of their hands, embroidering the alb, the stole, and the altar cloth, which excited great admiration. The church was put in order, and not only these ladies, but many others, who were their friends, took part in adorning it. It was an event of mark in Peñascosa, not only on account of the quality of the persons who had defrayed the expenses of the young priest's career, but, also, on account of the terrible circumstances which had given rise to this protection. Da. Eloisa was appointed godmother to the officiant, at the request of the latter. No one had a better right than she; but all the rest thought they had as good a right, and this led to secret resentments, and to several disagreeable little remarks.

The priest turned toward the people, and intoned, in a weak and trembling voice:

"Dominus vobiscum."

All the voices in the tribune, broken and infirm, responded, accompanied by the crash of the organ.

"Et cum spiritu tuo-o-o-o."

"How white he is!" said a young working-girl to the companion at her side.



“He looks like a statue.”

D. Narciso intoned the epistle in a sharp voice, elevating and lowering his tone, and listening to himself with pleasure.

“Heavens, how the chaplain is pluming himself!” remarked the working-girl.

“Yes; you see the humpback’s daughter is here. He wishes to shine.”

It was a matter for much remark in the town, that D. Narciso and Osuna’s daughter felt a mutual inclination, although only heterodox and malicious spirits dared to say it aloud. D. Narciso was, in truth, much more given to living among the weaker sex than among the stronger. No sooner had he arrived from Sarrió, three years previously, more or less, than he became the idol of the ladies of Peñascosa because of his elegant bearing, which presented a strong contrast with the slovenliness of the greater part of the ecclesiastics in the town, because of his vivacious conversation, his jests, and, above all, because of his fondness for being always with them—the women. He was very far from being handsome or graceful; he was a man of about five and thirty years of age, thin, swarthy, with large feet with protuberant toe-joints, and very ugly teeth; but he had succeeded in passing himself off as a man of humor. He never talked seriously to his devoted female friends. A comicality here, a comicality there, an endearing expression to this woman, a jest to that one, without ever experiencing the slightest embarrassment at finding himself the center of a numerous circle. On the contrary, D. Narciso took



extreme pleasure in this ; he enjoyed being encamped alone in the woman's gallery. He directed the consciences of the majority of them, and permitted himself to reprimand them severely, at times, outside the confessional. Almost all received his corrections submissively, even with pleasure, and if one did rebel momentarily, it was in order to ask pardon afterward. Moreover, D. Narciso was the regular guest of all festivities and *gaudeamus* of the elegant society of Peñascosa. He ate voraciously, and even boasted of it ; he drank after the same fashion, and when the dessert was served, he never failed to drink a health, accompanied by some couplet, which was nearly always tainted. For D. Narciso, who, on account of his ecclesiastical profession, could not permit himself jests referring to the relations of the sexes, thought that he had a right to launch the most disgusting remarks about the other miseries of the human body. And the ladies, strange to say, laughed and applauded, as though these had been the most wonderful bits of acuteness and ingeniousness. Two years after his arrival an accident had occurred. As he was descending the staircase of a house, which he frequented assiduously, he broke his leg. It was said that the husband of the lady to whom the house belonged had assisted in this fall, because he was not in perfect accord with the priest as to the hour and the occasion of the latter's visits ; but the pious souls of Peñascosa instantly hastened to strangle this sacrilegious rumor. And, in proof of the indignation with which they rejected the insinuation, the most



prominent ladies in town constituted themselves nurses at his bedside, not leaving him alone an instant, relieving each other, night and day, at intervals of a few hours, as though they were standing guard over the Most Holy One. D. Narciso deserved these attentions of the fair sex. No one ever occupied himself with so much ardor and fervent zeal concerning the salvation of the beautiful half of humanity. Not only did he direct the consciences of all who best represented it in Peñascosa, he fed his tender lambs with love, not omitting, nevertheless, to cast a stone at anyone of them who strayed, like the diligent shepherd that he was, and by dint of much vigilance, he had succeeded in founding an association, already established in many other quarters in Spain and abroad: the society of the Daughters of Mary. Only young, unmarried girls were allowed in this association. Such a privilege excited a vague displeasure, mingled with craving, in the bosoms of the married women. They considered themselves humiliated by his exclusion. D. Narciso took advantage of this shadow of rivalry to keep them in better subjection.

“Oh! ladies, you must not envy this privilege! You have a husband whom you must contemplate and serve.”

He uttered these words in a little tone of irony which showed the secret hostility which the chaplain felt toward all husbands. The women, upon whom the charms of the latter no longer exercised any fascination, laughed in a forced and malicious way, as though to say, “Yes, yes!” It was whispered



that many were in love with him. Da. Marciala, the wife of the apothecary on the Square, had gone to Sarrió to carry him some stockings, when the priest was passing a little time with his family. Doña Filomena, the widow of a lieutenant in the navy, made her only songs every day to help him in the mass. Nevertheless, a certain preference had been observed, on his part, for Obdulia, the daughter of Osuna, the steward of Montesinos.

"But is it certain that they like each other?" asked the young working-girl, when she heard her companion express herself thus plainly.

"I don't know, my dear! What I can say is, that D. Narciso is never out of their house, and that many days from the window of my room I see them running after each other in the garden of Montesinos, playing at hide and seek. So much so that I told him about it."

"You told him!" exclaimed the other in amazement.

"Yes, child; don't you see, I go to confess to him. There was no help for it. I said to him: 'Look here, D. Narciso—do not be offended—but when I see you and Obdulia playing in the garden, I have suspicions——'"

"*Ave Maria*, what barbarity! And what did he say?"

"He fairly suffocated. Uf! he began to say to me: 'It is through you and others like you that priests lose credit and honor, and religion is falling into decay!' He called me a bag of malice; he said that I seemed to be a liar, that such atrocities oc-



curred to me, and he said this and he said that. At first, he wanted to devour me; then he began to calm down. 'You are right, D. Narciso,' I answered, 'but I cannot help it.' And it is the truth, my dear, I can't help it—I can't!"

After the Epistle, the rector of Peñascosa intoned the Gospel. He had a harsh voice, without inflections. He read in a thoroughly inattentive manner, hardly glancing at his book, raising his small, hard eyes over his spectacles to contemplate fixedly, or rather to pulverize with his stare the son of Pepaina, who was slyly picking the gutterings from the tapers, and putting them in his pocket. Although he was one of the most shameless vagabonds in town, Lorito (this was the name by which the distinguished youth was known) felt annoyed and a trifle uneasy under the clergyman's gaze. There was cause for it. D. Miguel Vigil, rector of Peñascosa, had been, since the year 25 of the present century, one of the worst natured men in Spain, and we are not exaggerating in the least if we say, of this terra-queous globe. At the present moment he was eighty-two years of age; he was tall, gaunt, with pronounced features, eyebrows thick and joined, eyes small and penetrating. He still preserved great physical vigor, and what is more rare, hardly a white hair was to be seen in the locks which remained to him. While the first civil war lasted, he had abandoned his flock and had gone off to the Basque provinces, to fight, arms in hand, for the cause of the Pretender. He returned after the lapse of a few years. His ferocious character had not



been sweetened by going about the mountains under fire. His parishioners of Peñascosa found in him a shepherd very much resembling a captain of highwaymen. No one in town was haughtier than he. D. Miguel was accustomed to solve the most difficult cases of conscience in an instant, by means of a half dozen well planted cuffs or kicks. When Cosme's Marcelino would not marry Laurcana, the daughter of the weaver, D. Miguel posted himself in Cosme's house, caught Marcelino by the ears, gave him three hearty blows, and at the end of a fortnight, willy-nilly, he had them wedded. Ramón the confectioner refused to pay D. Cipriano two thousand reals which he had received without giving a receipt. The priest summoned Ramón to his house, locked himself up with him in a room, took a cudgel, and forced him to sign the proper receipt. By dint of these theological proceedings, D. Miguel inculcated evangelical morals in the souls committed to his care.

Novelties in worship were not to his taste. He regarded with scorn those ecclesiastics who sought to introduce them, and who paid attention to their costume and cleanliness. He tolerated them, because he knew that they were upheld by the bishop and high clergy of the diocese, but he laughed at them incessantly, in a coarse, irritating way, and he was accustomed to play them malicious tricks and disturb them somewhat in those mystical practices upon which they laid great stress. For example, there was a question of celebrating a general communion of children with orchestral accompaniment.



On the appointed day, D. Miguel sent to the church a gang of carpenters, who set to work at repairing the tribune with terrific hammerings, which prevented the concerted voices and instruments from being heard. On other occasions, he compelled D. Narciso's assiduous penitents to undergo an examination in Christian doctrine; or he prohibited their singing in church, after a month of preparatory practice; or he banished from the altar the cloths which they had embroidered and ironed; or he drove them out of a chapel where they had established themselves, etc., etc. These acts of despotism had earned for him the animadversions of the Frenchified ecclesiastics and of the female sex. D. Miguel did not care a doit for these strictures. The delight of his life did not lie in being loved and admired, but in enforcing his will at all times and on all occasions. Moreover, he might possess all the defects which his enemies attributed to him, but no one had ever perceived in him the shadow of an inclination for the weaker sex. He positively scorned women; he thought that not one of them was capable of saying or doing anything that contained common sense. In his virile character there seemed incarnate that Roman spirit which denied to woman the faculty of even directing herself independently.

Neither must it be supposed that D. Miguel showed obedience toward his superiors. It cost the bishop immense labor to come to an understanding with him. If he sent him an order, the priest stowed it away in the archives, without complying with



it; if he was making a round of visits, D. Miguel took to his bed, feigning illness, that he might avoid receiving him. The bishop ended by paying no heed to him, and allowing him to go his own way. He acted as confessor in Peñascosa only to half a dozen veterans of the civil war. The rest of his parishioners were divided among the chaplains attached to the parish. Four-fifths of the ladies confided the burden of their delinquencies to the irresistible D. Narciso. D. Miguel did not suffer the slightest vexation in consequence of this preference. And nevertheless, the restricted number of his penitents asserted that he was a prudent, discreet, and delicate confessor in his questions.

Having terminated the reading of the Gospel, he was able to grant himself the satisfaction of gazing persistently for a while at Lorito's movements. Why was the rascal standing there, staring so absent-mindedly at the tribune, listening with rapture to the melody of the organ, when, not two seconds before, he had seen him thrust at least half a pound of wax into his pocket? Thoughts of death and extermination flashed through the soul of the rector. Nevertheless, he found strength to restrain himself. The mass continued. The new priest raised the sacred Host with trembling hands, amid a murmur of fervor and admiration. The organist, letting loose a *tremolo* with his most snuffling stops, contributed powerfully to render the descent of the Son of God into the hands of a man more solemn and touching. Gil felt his body quiver under the impression. An ineffable joy surged up from the



depths of his breast, and gently clutched at his throat. This immense, infinite favor, which his God conferred on him, which he had hoped for with such eagerness, moved him to the last fibers of his heart. His eyes were veiled in tears, and when he knelt, before elevating the cup of the Passion, he remained for several moments without being able to rise, and on the point of swooning.

At that moment, Osuna, the steward of Montesinos, was partaking of very distinct impressions. Very peculiar stories were current in regard to him among the men. The neighbors despised and also feared him. He was considered to be a strange, mysterious, evil-intentioned being. He occupied a post from which he could do much harm to many people. He was the steward of Montesinos, the richest proprietor of Peñascosa, and he inhabited one of the wings of the palace, an immense house, which the latter owned. He had buried three wives, and had a daughter, with whom we are already acquainted by name. He was extremely diminutive, with an immense hump on his shoulders, a withered complexion, pendant, flacid cheeks, eyes without brilliancy, and always frightened. A slight tremor was perceptible in his hands, as often happens with men exhausted with sensuality.

We already know that he had placed himself as near Da. Teodora as possible. Da. Teodora had changed her position several times; she ran forward, then stepped to one side; all in vain. Wherever she went, she felt Osuna's feet in her skirts. When she felt them, a flood of crimson flamed on



her fresh cheeks, she trembled like a lass twelve years of age. In no woman was modesty ever preserved with more delicacy and transparency. Some conversations, now in the mode, offended her; in her presence, no allusion, either direct or indirect, could be made to certain subjects. She said nothing, for she was prudence incarnate, and of timid disposition; but she was seen to blush, grow uneasy, and desire to withdraw. Her body was as pure and fair as her soul. She liked to dress with elegance, and she cared for her person with refinements unknown in Peñascosa. Those who had known her as a child said that she had never been pretty, only passable, and that now with her snowy hair, her fresh skin, and rosy cheeks, she was handsomer than she had ever been. Why had Da. Teodora remained unmarried, since she possessed an agreeable face and a suitable fortune? It was said that she had had some very fine and romantic love passages with a lieutenant of Arepiles, who had perished in the action of Ramales. On the eve of the battle, he had taken leave of her, by the medium of a card written on a drumhead; his heart warned him that on the following day "a treacherous bullet would cut short the thread of his existence, but that he should die with the name of Teodora on his lips." She had preserved the card as a precious relic, and she guarded her heart also faithful to the memory of the valiant and romantic lieutenant. Nevertheless, for many years she had had an assiduous wooer. D. Juan Casanova, that gentleman of aquiline and majestic features, of whom we have spoken, went to



her house unfailingly, every night, from eight until eleven o'clock. This was sufficient to make people in town believe that he was her platonic courtier and that, sooner or later, he would end by marrying her. This happy event had been expected for the last twenty years in Peñascosa. At the present moment, considerable doubt was entertained as to its realization. The future bride and groom were growing too old, especially D. Juan, the accursed rheumatism in whose legs cost him superhuman efforts to ascend to her house. Thus, with every day that passed, they were becoming less and less fitted for fulfilling the sacred duties of marriage. Moreover, and finally, a certain event, which we shall mention later on, somewhat disturbed the tranquil and affectionate relations of the shriveled gentleman and the well preserved spinster.

When the deacon chanted the "*Ite, missa est*," she gave a sigh of relief, and prepared to rise and escape from the indecorous feet which were persecuting her. But it was a more arduous undertaking than she imagined. The church was so crammed with the faithful that no one could turn around. All desired to kiss the hands of the new priest, or, at least, witness that tender and curious ceremony. The latter descended a flight of steps from the altar and stood motionless, facing the multitude, casting upon it a vague and smiling glance. A loud murmur arose, which almost turned to a shout, when D. Narciso gently caught hold of the godmother, that she might be the first to pay her homage to the officiant. Da. Eloisa knelt before her godson, and



kissed his hands with visible emotion. When she rose, several tears were coursing down her cheeks. Then she took a flask of perfumed water, gave another to Da. Rita, and, posting themselves on the right and left of the priest, they began to sprinkle those who approached to kiss his hands. One by one, jostling each other in their haste, the faithful rendered him this homage. The men kissed the palm of his hand, the women kissed the back, as they had been instructed. The latter appeared touched and merry, and laughed when Da. Rita or Da. Eloisa shook a few drops of cologne water in their faces; then they retired to make room for others; and, from afar, they continued to contemplate, with affectionate interest, the delicate and pallid face of the priest. A cheerful commotion resounded through the church. The rustling of skirts, the whispers and suppressed laughter of the women produced the buzzing of an apiary. The sound of the bells, which the sacristan and several small boys were chiming aloft in the tower, entered vivaciously and pleasantly through the windows. Several rays of the sun also made their way in, and spread over the altar, causing its gilded metals to gleam. But if on its way it stumbled over a pretty blond head, such as abounded among the working-girls of Peñascosa, it found no impropriety in pausing to bestow a kiss of admiration.

Gil was deeply moved; his heart bounded in his breast. He felt an impulse to burst into sobs; he managed to restrain himself, though not without difficulty, and this caused him discomfort. These



demonstrations of veneration, although they represented a customary ceremony, put him to shame. At the sight of all the grandees and ladies of the town kneeling at his feet,—these persons who had always inspired him with so much respect,—he felt confused and ill at ease. His lips were contracted by a smile which revealed more disquiet than pleasure. Da. Eloisa and Da. Rita used up several flasks of essence, bestowing copious sprinkling, especially upon their friends, whose faces they bathed amid a hurrah which was none the less savory for being repressed. Little by little the religious solemnity became transformed into a festival of private and familiar character. The female friends of the godmother and the protectresses of the young priest were gradually left behind, forming in their turn a picturesque group, while the rest of the people filed out through the two doors of the church. A ray of sunlight fell upon the priest; his rich vestments of cloth of gold sent forth vivid flashes; his handsome blond head resembled that of a cherub. The ladies gazed at him in ecstasy.

The rector and D. Narciso, who had assisted in the mass, had retired to remove their vestments. The former speedily returned, provided with cassock and cap, beneath which various sinister thoughts were in agitation. The conduct of Lorito, in connection with the gutterings of the tapers, had rendered him pensive and gloomy. For some time past that young person had enjoyed the privilege of vexing him. On one occasion he knew, the fellow had climbed on the roof of the church, to get



possession of some sparrows' nests; he suspected him of having, on another occasion, robbed the earthen jar in the corridor of the rectory, of eggs. And, although he had contrived to tranquilize his spirit by means of a few adequate kicks, still he felt sad and agitated every time that Pepaina's son presented himself to his vision.

Without troubling himself much over the touching ceremony which was in progress in the chancel, D. Miguel traversed the church with deliberate tread, scrutinizing all the corners. The persons who still remained in the church made way for him with more fear than respect. He penetrated all the chapels, made a minute examination of the state of all the tapers which were burning on the altars. He must have recognized in them some trace of the passage of the vandal, for his face became more and more lowering. In the last, on the left, where stood the baptismal font, he finally got scent of the merry rascal. He walked with precaution, and with his energetic, aquiline nose looming up, he was able at length to descry at a distance the flat nose and shining phiz of the scamp, who, in company with one of his most faithful disciples, was occupied in adding to the immense ball of wax which he had extracted from the candles. The rector experienced the nervous tremor of a cat in sight of a rat; he made ready, like her, slipping his feet lightly over the floor, and, bang! with a couple of bounds he fell upon the barbarians. But Lorito was not a vulgar vandal, one of those who allow themselves to be caught like an innocent little rat. Without seeing D,



Miguel he smelled his powerful breath, and, ducking suddenly, at the moment when the latter was on the point of clutching him, he succeeded in dodging the blow, and pitching headlong on the altar, before the rector could turn round, he had already set out at full career for the door. It was in vain. D. Miguel hastily caught up the bronze Christ which stood on the altar, and hurled it with such force and accurate aim that it struck him in the head, and he fell to the ground, while his blood flowed copiously.

At the sound of the lad's shriek and of the noise produced by his fall, people ran in; they picked him up and rendered him the first succor, stanching the blood with spiders' webs and binding a kerchief about his head, like a fillet. While these operations were in progress they did not omit to grumble, though in low tones, at the brutality of the rector. The latter, perfectly satisfied with his work, retired majestically to the sacristy, but not until he had seized the opportunity to administer a couple of kicks on the buttocks of the accomplice, who was stealing away, tremulous and cast-down at his master's misfortune.

But the glorious progenitor of the latter, Pepaina's Pepe, as he was called by the populace, in order to distinguish him from the numerous other Pepes, a fisherman by trade, and a very pacific brute who did not utter above three dozen words in a week, at the sight of his son in this state, began to clamor in the vestibule of the church like a man possessed. The sense of his discourse was that he felt no respect whatever for the ecclesiastical profession, and that



those people who dared to suppose that he, Pepe Raya, would refrain from administering to the priest, as soon as he set his foot outside the church, a cuff to the starboard and another to the larboard, and perhaps also, a kick behind that should send him under water, were suffering under a lamentable delusion.

D. Miguel, who had thought he caught the sense of some of the extremes of this discourse from within, insisted upon stepping out into the porch to witness his demonstration, but D. Narciso and the sacristan restrained him. They bore him off to the sacristy, and there they kept him busy until the danger was past.

When the people came out of the church the sun was floating in the azure expanse, bathing it with light and joy. The bells chimed with increasing frenzy. A multitude of rockets went off with a loud crash and impregnated the air with the smell of powder. The waves also crashed pleasantly against the rocky cliffs, which almost completely surrounded the church. In this pleasing concert of a nature which rarely smiles, the only harsh note to be heard was the deep bass intoned by Pepaina's husband.



## II.

PEÑASCOSA is situated at the bottom of a small bay on the Cantabrian coast. Its houses extend all along the seashore without penetrating more than a hundred rods inland. Only at the summit of the narrow pass lies a square of medium size, whence starts the highway which leads to Nieva. The portion of the town which lies to the right is less extensive and important than that which lies to the left. On this bank runs the best, and we may even say, the only street of the settlement. It is long, steep in places, in other places level, here broad, there narrow, with walks on one side for pedestrians. The houses on the right all have access to the sea by staircases, of better or worse construction according to the edifice. It ends in the Field of Discouragement, where the church rises on a point of land which projects into the sea. This field derives its name from several willow trees, whose branches droop over the benches of rough stone, where the honorable neighbors sit to take the sun in winter, or to inhale the breeze in summer. It is the spot on which take place all the festivals and public merry-makings of the town, the illuminations and fireworks, ascents of balloons, music, dancing, and gayety. It serves also as the place of assembly for the society of the mariners when it becomes neces-



sary to come together and settle a question, and as a camp for the fair, and a maneuvering ground for the little school children. It is no wonder that this should be so, given the peculiar structure of the town, which contains no open and commodious place except this square.

The pier is a stone jetty which starts from about the middle of the street already mentioned, and projects a little more than a hundred rods into the sea. The descent to it is down an easy slope on which stand at least half a dozen wine shops, and two wretched little coffee-houses, the Marina and the Imperial. Both swarm with patrons at all hours, but especially at twilight, when the fishing boats come in from the sea and the crews have finished their labors on the tenders and smacks at anchor. These are the only vessels which come to Peñascosa. Nevertheless, there is a steamer which plows the waves of the bay from time to time, and dares to approach the pier. It is a tugboat from Sarrió, called the *Seagull*. Its long, plaintive whistles send the neighborhood into ecstasies of pride. For in the matter of loving their own village and scorning all the rest of the earth, no one has ever surpassed the Peñascosa people, not even the Romans. There does not exist a Peñascosa man who is not firmly convinced that his port is the one most favored by nature on all the Spanish coast. If it has not the commercial importance of Barcelona, Málaga, or Bilbao, it is because no one has busied himself preparing for it by adequate works. Toward Sarrió, a town whose population is five times greater, and which has ac-



quired great importance during the last few years, they feel inveterate hatred and disdain. When they behold steamers sail past "the sheltered, tranquil, and secure harbor" of Peñascosa, and enter the "dirty and dangerous anchorage" of Sarrió, every good Peñascosian feels his bosom heave with indignation, as he who has been the victim of a robbery, and sees the swindler drive by in his carriage. It is worth while to hear them talk about the qualities of the port of Sarrió, especially when a stranger is listening to them. A slightly ironical and scornful smile begins to dawn on their lips, which grows more and more accentuated until it is transformed into a sonorous, Homeric laugh, when they arrive at this point: "The crabs are all greatly pleased with the bay of Sarrió. They say that they can enter and leave it without any danger whatever." If the fishing boats of that port are occasionally forced to put into Peñascosa on account of a storm, with what very humiliating patronage do the natives receive them. And when the latter go to the abhorred town on business, they are nervous and uneasy there; the traffic and sounds of the pier resound dolorously in their hearts; they return to their town with stomach upset, and in excitement, narrating the thousand annoyances that the envy of the Sarrians has caused them. They keep an exact account of all the unfortunate occurrences on the bar of their rival, and are never weary of pitying the poor foreign barks whom impious Fate conducts to so inhospitable a port.

The Peñascosa people are proud, not alone of the



draught, shelter, and security of their port. They possess in addition another set of natural advantages which are really inestimable. In the suburbs of the town exists a spring of ferruginous water, which is the admiration of natives and strangers, especially of natives. Strangers think that if the water were not mixed with so many heterogeneous substances, it might be drunk with more facility, and would produce the same results. And, to tell the truth, we also incline to believe that its health-giving virtues are not augmented by what the children of the suburbs throw into it, and by the even less diplomatic manner in which they sometimes relieve themselves. Thanks to the influence of the climate, the best hogs in the world are raised in Peñascosa, and it is said that in no foreign land do people know so well what it is to eat ham as in this favored village. It is equally lucky that, if the hogs of Peñascosa are the best in the world, the chestnuts on which they are fed are the plumpest, sweetest, and most nutritious. The sea of Peñascosa is also equal to that of other ports; above all, there is no comparison between it and that of Sarrió. There are persons who, without knowing why, grow gradually weaker and weaker in the latter village, lose their appetite and their temper; but, as soon as they begin to take sea-baths in Peñascosa, they recover. The baths at Sarrió produce no medicinal effect; on the contrary, everyone who bathes there exposes himself to eruptions, catarrhs, rheums, and other very sad disorders. On the east, or rather on the north-east, the town is sheltered against the most violent



and constant winds. Consequently, the climate is mild and benign; epidemics do not flourish. The Peñascosians announce with pride that during the last cholera three hundred and twelve persons died in Sarrió, while only sixty-one died in Peñascosa, and of these at least thirty descended to the grave because of lamentable neglect, which their respective families should have avoided, if only for the credit of the town. It is useless to speak of the fish which are caught in this privileged port. For a hundred leagues roundabout, no one is ignorant of the fact that its sardines, cod, conger-eels, and bream are above comparison with those of Sarrió. As this appears singular, on account of the short distance which separates one town from the other, the Peñascosa people explain it by the better feeding ground of their fish. In short, we know no other town more grateful to the Supreme Creator for the topographical, hydrographical, and climatological conditions with which he has been pleased to favor it. With regard to ethnographical conditions, the best advantage which we have been able to perceive is the beauty and grace of the women. They are tall, compactly built, with rosy skin and black eyes; their voices are sweet and sonorous, and they speak with a very characteristic musical accent; they seem to be reciting with the piano. They do not claim to be beauties, but they are so. On the other hand, they pride themselves on singing better than the women of any other town in the province, and this is not the case. It is certain that, as we have just pointed out, there exist among them many pleasing



and ample voices ; but their ear, and, above all, their taste, do not correspond to their voices. They mutilate what they sing in such a manner that no one, not even the author himself who composed it, recognizes it. The truth is that the Peñascosa women abuse *fermatas* and *fiorituras*, and that the maidens of Sarrió, without having such good voices, sing with more taste and refinement. Silence upon this point, for if anyone were to repeat it in Peñascosa, they would tear his eyes out.

The youthful Peñascosians have also taken it into their heads (if we were to say their beautiful heads, it would be no falsehood) that they possess a particular aptitude for composing couplets appropriate to various circumstances. They generally compose them to popular airs, which serve for dancing on holidays. If a school building is inaugurated, they sing a couplet ; if the deputy of the district arrives to take the baths, serenade and couplets ; if D. José, the tobacco retailer, sets up a line of omnibuses to the capital, there is a laudatory couplet to D. José, the tobacconist. But the branch in which the young working-girls shine with especial brilliancy is in satirical couplets ; we need not add that the favorite target of their satires is the petty, dangerous, and dirty port of Sarrió. These couplets are, usually, well measured, and the sting is visible in many of them. What does it matter ? The Peñascosians sing them with a fire and resonance which drive the girls of Sarrió to desperation, and make them fall ill with wrath.

The men are usually, as everywhere, more homely



than handsome, more dull than gracious, more rough than courteous, more vulgar than original. Nevertheless, there is in nearly all of them a touch of imagination which, if it does not serve them to write novels, renders them curious and eager for novelties beyond the men of the rest of the province. Every insignificant event acquires grandiose proportions in Peñascosa. The settlement is deeply agitated every time that a certain brigantine schooner arrives, bringing boards of red pine from the North for Don Romuald, and it rushes down in a body to be present at the unloading. A common prestidigitateur produces extraordinary commotion, and occasions long and violent disputes in the club, in the coffee-houses, in the evening gatherings, in the shops, encourages the taste and fancy of the Peñascosians for various careers. On one occasion a magnetizer made his appearance, and held several sessions in the theater (so-called). For the space of six months, the Peñascosians devoted themselves almost entirely to magnetizing each other. One could not enter any gathering without coming upon a young lady sleeping, while a young man of the town, in the attitude of driving away the flies from her, flung handfuls of fluid in her face; all the world were mediums and spiritualists, and gyrating watchmen; some honorable persons came near going mad; one of them rushed out at night demanding confession, in shrieks, because he had been talking with a certain defunct relative. Then came a phrenologist. The Peñascosians devoted themselves for another space to feeling each other's heads, and making prophecies



regarding the fate reserved for the children. The dissolving views of a juggler engendered a fondness for magic lanterns, and the dramatic companies which got so far, real gangs of rascals, called forth strange aptitudes for the scenic art in many individuals who, up to that time, had never revealed them. A shipwrecked Austrian inspired them with love for philology; he gave several lessons in German and Russian to various conspicuous persons of the place, and, at the end of two months, he fled with six thousand reals belonging to D. Jose, the tobacconist, two thousand belonging to D. Ramigio Flórez, and a few more pesetas belonging to other gentlemen. Nothing else was talked of for a couple of months.

There is in Peñascosa a club, which subscribes to five periodicals from Madrid and one from Lancia. The *Sarrió Beacon*, which was sent to them gratuitously, was returned to its source, at the proposition of various most worthy members when this paper proposed (how disgusting!) the construction of a grand port of refuge at Sarrió. There exists also a society of recreation, of which the life and soul is D. Gaspar de Silva, a local poet, who has written more dramatic works than Shakspeare. He gave it the name of the Agora, in consonance with his classic tastes. It is the temple of art. Here the pieces of D. Gaspar are played by young amateurs, his lyrical poems are read, amid the tears and applause of the young ladies of the place, charades and logogriphs are guessed, mandolinatas and storcellos are sung in astounding Italian, and the mem-



bers enjoy themselves in a thousand different ways. Truly, the Agora of Peñascosa recalls, even more than the Greek assembly which has given it its name, the circle of the Queen of Navarre, that agreeable and poetical reunion of fair ladies and cavaliers which overflowed with wit, and from which such elegant inventions have proceeded. Nevertheless, we will not carry our eagerness for similitudes to the point of comparing D. Gaspar with Marguerite de Valois. Both of them must consider themselves as privileged beings, in their own style; but they belong to different styles.

D. Gaspar is a tall, thin man, with a face covered by colored spots which betrayed his stormy youth; thin hair; a beard, which he wore after the fashion of Espronceda, Larra, and the literary men of the year thirty-four, sprinkled with gray, bristling; huge hands and feet, the latter so pinched with corns that the poet always walked with the aid of a crutch, and with back strongly bowed. In spite of this circumstance, it cannot be denied that he is a most notable man, and it is not without reason that Peñascosa prides itself on having been his cradle, and on keeping him in its bosom. He has never limited himself, like the majority of literary men, to cultivating only one manner, with greater or less success. He has written epic poems, lyrical poems—poems of all classes, amorous, satirical, philosophical, didactic; he is a novelist and a dramatic author. Three-quarters of his works have remained in manuscript; but those which have been printed (at the expense of a first cousin of the poet, who lived in



Puerto Rico) suffice to render his memory imperishable. At least, it is certain that we shall never forget, so long as existence endures, those which we have had the happiness to become personally acquainted with. Silva is a poet who has preserved more likeness to the ancient than to the modern bards. Like Shakspeare, like Molière and Lope de Rueda, he has presented his own works on the stage, reserving to himself the prominent parts, because of the curvature of his spine. In this case he is accustomed to employ a choked and quivering voice, which causes profound emotion in his neighbors. The titles of his plays bear a stamp of originality which recalls, to some extent, those of the immortal English dramatist. Among other strange and very original titles, we remember the following: "Don't come to me with frog-fish, or I'll break your breast-bone" (comedy, in three acts); "Between cabbage and cabbage, a lettuce" (piece in one act); "And yet we die" (drama in three acts); "Do you like blondes or not?" (piece in one act). Although he has shone, and does shine in all varieties of literature, we think that his genius is more of the dramatic than of the poetic order.

There are no other regular societies in Peñascosa. The gathering at the apothecary's, that at D. Martín de las Casas', that of the musqueteers (this last held in the open air, on the Field of Discouragement), are free assemblies, without either artistic or political ideal.

Of this town, distinguished for its marvelous geographical situation, and for the talent of its sons,



the target of envy not alone of Sarrió, but also of Santander and Bilbao and all the other ports of the Cantabrian coast, which have sought in vain to humiliate it; of this generous, patriotic, idealistic town, the young priest who is the hero of this truthful history had been appointed assistant rector. This had been effected through the influence and mediation of D. Martín de las Casas and other prominent persons. It cost them no trouble to obtain this appointment from the Bishop, because Gil had attracted great attention as an industrious and intelligent student in the seminary at Lancia. At the same time, his pure habits, and the sweetness and gentleness of his character, testified to by all the professors, placed him in a position to fill any office in the Church. The rector of the seminary, several dignitaries among the clergy, and even the prelate himself, had suggested to him the idea of remaining in Lancia, and entering into competition for one of the canonries which might fall vacant in the cathedral. No one doubted his having sufficient knowledge to obtain it. Nevertheless, the new priest declined the proposal with humility, alleging the insufficiency of his studies, which he hoped to amplify in time, and his excessive youth for a charge of such importance, in case it were intrusted to him. In the depths of his being there existed also, without his being aware of it himself, a certain repugnance for the sociable and luxurious life of the canons.

Gil was a mystic. He had had the good fortune to find in the rector of the seminary a man of



exalted piety, an eloquent orator, passionate, endowed with genius—a genuine apostle. This extraordinary man, who formed a contrast with the prudent and prosaic ecclesiastics who surrounded him, exercised a decisive influence upon the delicate and dreamy spirit of our hero, and carried him with him in his lofty flight, communicating to him the fire which consumed his own ascetic soul. His education was mediocre, but even this slender stock of knowledge weighed upon him. He felt an idolatrous respect, which he communicated to his disciple, for theology, because of the mysterious and incomprehensible element therein contained. On the other hand, he looked with indifference on philosophy, and scorned the natural sciences. Like all men of lively faith and ardent heart, he was an enemy to reason. When one loves and believes in very truth, one craves for the absurd, one despoils one's soul, with delight, of its analytical faculty, and lays it at the feet of the beloved object, as Saint Isabel placed her crown at the feet of the image of Jesus, before she began to pray. It was a case of suicide through mystic orthodoxy. Under his direction, the seminary at Lancia was gradually losing the slight varnish of science which had been given to it through the last reforms. The courses of physics, natural history, mathematics, and philosophy were studied, but with so little profit that no professor dared suspend a student, no matter what nonsense he uttered in the phantom of an examination which was held. On the other hand, decisive importance was conceded to religious prac-



tices, and to all pious exercises. The day was passed in prayer and meditation. The student who won most appreciation was not the one who recited and understood the lessons best, but the one who could pass the most hours on his knees, or fast with the most rigor, the one who was most silent and taciturn.

The majority of the students, sons of workingmen and artisans, accomplished these duties without great effort, perceiving therein a means of arriving speedily and without difficulty at the priesthood. Study would have mortified them more. For Gil, such a manner of life represented constant toil, a battle with himself. His vigorous intellect hungered for study, his imagination longed for exercise. He set to work, with systematic tenacity, to thwart the expansions of his nature; he began the slow suicide which his master and all the mystics of the world had committed before him. He penetrated his master's thought, he shared his gloomy ideal of life, his rage for penitence, his disdain of pleasure, his horror both of sciences and the world. This conflict with the flesh has its own poetry. Otherwise, there would be no mystics. When he finished his course, he was the model which was held up to the students. Equally humble, reserved, grave, and sweet, he was indefatigable at his prayers, and received the mark *meritissimus* in all departments.

Now we find him exercising the post of assistant rector of Peñascosa. He would have preferred to set off and rule a country parish. Intercourse with the world produced a painful impression on him;



for him, Peñascosa, with its club, its cafés, its evening gatherings, was a center of frivolity, not to say of corruption. But Da. Eloisa and his protectresses had made a point of keeping him in the town, and the rector of the seminary, his venerated master, counseled him not to disregard their entreaties; if the frivolity of the town annoyed him, his task would be all the more meritorious and fruitful; the souls of country bumpkins do not require such fastidiously nice care. With the emotion and anxiety of a person who puts his hand to a most sacred work, the newly ordained priest began his tasks. He rose at daybreak and betook himself to the church, which he was the first to enter, before the sacristan. He seated himself in the confessional and remained there, listening to those who approached the holy tribunal, until eight o'clock, the hour at which he said his mass. Then he heard confessions for a while longer and returned home. Until the hour for dinner he busied himself with study, meditation, and prayer. Then to the church again; rosary, instruction in doctrine, ordering and adornment of the temple. As soon as he arrived the latter began to be clean and decent. He did not scold, but by dint of example, laying his own hand to the duster and the broom, he succeeded in getting the sacristan to do his duty. But that in which his fervent soul found its chief delight was in hastening promptly to the bedside of the dying, remaining riveted there, exhorting them to repentance, sustaining their trust in God until they breathed their last. This was the agreeable part of



his task, the really Divine labor which left his heart inundated with sweetness and enthusiasm. Wrestling a soul from the clutches of the demon! When, at dawn, after closing the eyes of a poor parishioner, he directed his steps to the church, shivering with cold, his frail body broken by a night of vigil and toil, his eyes sought that sea, always wrathful, that gloomy sky; and, instead of feeling the sadness and grief of existence, his spirit swelled with joy and tears of gratitude flooded his eyes. It was the sublime delight of Jesus traversing on foot the burning shores of the sea of Tiberias, announcing the kingdom of the Father; it was the delight of San Francisco, when he returned to the Porciúncula with a new companion of penitence; it was that of the holy King Fernando when he gained possession of Sevilla; it was, in short, the delight of all apostles.

He had gone to live with the rector, not from taste, but because the latter had insisted that assistants—or vicars, as they were called here—should live with him, perhaps in order that he might be the better able to tyrannize over them. The rectory was situated not very far from the church, at the entrance of the Field of Discouragement. D. Miguel's servants consisted of an old housekeeper and a young man. The spiritual delights of poor Gil were thoroughly compensated for by the numberless oppositions and annoyances which his rough rector made him suffer in consequence. D. Miguel was as barbarous in private as in public life. His despotic will made itself felt in every



detail, at every moment of existence. Now, if this will had been rational, there would have been no objection to make ; but the will of this formidable old man was as capricious as it was malign. He took a delight in thwarting the wishes of those about him, however trivial they might be. He kept his housekeeper in a stew. One day he prevented her taking her nap ; another day he killed a dog for which she had conceived a great affection ; he flung away the earthen pots which she had in the balcony, or compelled her to remain in the house on some grand religious festival, or made her pay for any imperfection in the table service, etcetera, etcetera. He fairly toasted his manservant on a gridiron ; sometimes he dispatched him, on the eve of a holiday, to some hamlet or other on an insignificant errand, in order that he might not enjoy himself ; at other times he locked the door on him if he arrived a minute later than he was permitted, and made him sleep out of doors, or he compelled him to shave off his whiskers, or dressed him in the loose gown of an acolyte, because he had observed that this vexed the man extremely. He crucified the vicar. He had had a great many vicars, and he had studied each of them in silence for a few days, in order to discover their likings and tendencies. Once thoroughly informed, he set about thwarting them with special care. He had made the last vicar, an obese man, addicted to the pleasures of the table, endure every extremity of hunger, until it was a miracle that he did not die ; the wretched man returned from saying mass, with great desire to



swallow his chocolate. Much chocolate he got. The rector had previously sent the housekeeper off on some errand which took at least two hours. What weakness, what perspirations, what pangs, fell to the lot of the poor chaplain. If they arrived, in their evening walks, at any house where they were invited to sup, the rector declined, pretending that they had already supped at home. He did not suffer, because he was extremely frugal, but the mouth of his poor companion watered.

Gil's studiousness caused him great surprise. Among the many assistants who had filed through his house, he had not chanced upon any mystic down to the present time. One he had had who was fond of worship and preaching, but without the ardent piety which this one displayed. The wrong-headed Don Miguel gazed at him with a species of comical curiosity, with the disdainful compassion with which old men almost always regard the illusions and the paroxysms of youth. For some time he allowed him to labor freely in the Lord's vineyard. Gil's innocence and goodness appeased his malicious instincts. But, in the long run, these could not remain inactive, and he began to throw obstacles in the way of his vicar's apostolic work. Sometimes he forbade his preaching on certain days; again he prohibited his sitting so many hours in the confessional, or forced him to say mass later. There were occasions when, feigning absent-mindedness, he left him locked up in the house, so that he could not say it at any hour.

Our priest accepted with resignation these vexa-



tions, and intrusted them to God, as he did all the troubles and pleasures which he experienced in this life. D. Miguel's character inspired him with repugnance and terror. His soul was too much inflamed with divine love to enable him to perceive the comical and interesting side in this extravagant person, to contemplate and study him with the eye of an artist. This violence, this ferocity rather, disturbed his delicate soul. The small attachment which the rector displayed for theological subjects, or anything unworldly, made him indignant. Above all, the sordid avarice of this old man—who stood with one foot in the grave—of the minister of him who said: “Ye shall take no gold, or silver, or money; nor shall you take a scrip on your journey; neither two tunics, nor shoes, nor staff,” caused him invincible repugnance. The rector of Peñascosa passed for a rich man, and he was so, in fact. A rule of fifty years over a populous parish, and a life of extreme economy, had enabled him to lay by a respectable capital. He had bought much land, but it was said that he also kept in his house a great quantity of coin. And it must have been so, considering the vigilance which he exercised, especially at night. When D. Miguel had finished his frugal supper and recited a *pater noster* by way of grace, he rose, and, staggering a little, for his body was more robust than his legs, he went to the chest of drawers, drew from it a pair of enormous flint-lock pistols, and, holding one in each hand, he betook himself to his bedchamber beneath the astonished gaze of Gil, for, although the scene was



repeated every day, it never failed to produce painful stupefaction. A priest with two pistols in his hands! In those very hands which, on the following day, would touch the body of the Redeemer! He had occasionally seen his master, the rector of the seminary, in bed. On his night table lay a crucifix of bronze and a blood-stained scourge. On comparing the two priests, he not only felt his admiration for that most virtuous of men increase, but also, in spite of himself, a certain scorn for his rector sprang to life in his soul.

In spite of this, his humility forced him to repulse this sentiment, and to repeat to himself the phrase common to all mystics: "This man, and every man, is better than I." Not only then did he look on him as his superior in the hierarchy and render him all due respect, but he made efforts to represent him to himself as better than himself morally. In the confessional, complicated cases of conscience were presented to him, which did not enter into the formulas of the books he had studied. Perceiving that he was in difficulties as to their solution, he had recourse to D. Miguel with a request for light. He timidly expounded the case to him and asked his advice. The crossgrained old man listened to him with visible impatience, and, knitting his grim brows, he usually answered him with asperity:

"Go ahead, and don't halt over nonsensical stuff!"

Nonsensical stuff! The rector of Peñascosa qualified thus the aberrations of a conscience, the pangs



of remorse ! The assistant was astounded, and did his best to flee from the thoughts which, at that moment, attacked his brain in throngs. He ended by not asking any counsel of him, and in this he acted wisely. D. Miguel's moral theology was, without doubt, more deficient than his military tactics.

Next to receiving the last sigh of the dying, the new priest's greatest pleasure consisted in sitting in the confessional and clearing up the consciences of his penitents, and leading them in the path of perfection. But this pleasure gradually decreased when he observed the pettiness, the insignificance, of the persons who approached his tribunal. Nearly all were women ; it was a miracle when a man came to confess. These women, always the same, and with the same sins, ended by wearying him. In the beginning, as he observed the docility with which they listened to his counsels, the ardent piety which they exhibited, and their fondness for the sacraments, he imagined that it would be an easy matter to make them better every day, to raise them to sanctity, or something but little short of it. He speedily convinced himself that it was more difficult to change the life of these pious persons than that of a hardened sinner. This caused him great depression of spirits ; he began to weary of these trifles, of the insipid and stupid domestic confidences with which the devout women seasoned their confessions. And he could do no less than admire his companion, Father Narciso, who spent whole hours confessing them with the same



fondness as on the first day. He not only confessed them, but, on one pretext or another, he remained constantly with them ; sometimes it was the Flowers of May, again the novena of the daughter of Mary ; again the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, etcetera. Father Narciso was, as we already know, the spiritual director and the idol of the fair sex of Peñascosa.

Nevertheless, since the arrival of Father Gil in town, his flock had suffered some losses. Various pious women had abandoned his protecting cassock to place themselves under the ferule of the new vicar. The latter did not possess the verbosity and grace of Father Narciso, nor did he take pleasure in exchanging spicy jests with his penitents ; but, on the other hand, he possessed a face as delicate as that of a cherub, a sweet and melancholy smile, and manners so suave and distinguished that they compensated for the qualities of the former. Several ladies took this view of it at least, and this caused the disbanding which we have mentioned. But the odd, the astounding part of the business was that the favorite lamb of the chaplain of Sarrió—that Obdulia about whom the young working-girls had murmured on the day of the new mass—also abandoned her shepherd, with whom she had frisked spiritually in the garden of Montesinos, according to these girls, and came humbly to prostrate herself at the feet of the young priest.

Two months after the latter had taken possession of his office, he sat in the confessional one evening, reading the prayers from his pocket breviary. There



was no one in the little chapel in which he was accustomed to post himself. Two women of the lower class, whom he had confessed, had already taken their departure. All of a sudden, a tall, slender figure half obstructed the door, through which some light still entered. Father Gil raised his eyes and recognized Osuna's daughter. He knew her very well by sight, although he had never spoken to her. He was not ignorant of the fact that she was a very assiduous penitent of Father Narciso, and although certain rumors had reached his ears, he had rejected them with indignation, of course. Nevertheless, this young woman who was so attached to the Church, so free and restless, was not sympathetic to him. Obdulia had a pale, a very pale, complexion, from which her black eyes shone out large and rarely beautiful. Her hair was black also, and abundant, her waist very slender ; her whole person indicated a sickly temperament. She could not justly be called beautiful, but interesting and distinguished she certainly was. She advanced slowly through the chapel. The young clergyman thought that she was come to ask him some question about the general communion on the following day. But instead of this, Obdulia bent toward him timidly and asked him, in a trembling voice, which betrayed extreme emotion :

“Can you confess me?”

He was surprised and displeased. He paused a moment before replying ; finally, he said gravely :

“That is what I am here for, to confess all who desire it.”



The young woman's pale face was covered with a deep blush; her lips quivered as though to thank him, but no sound escaped them. She knelt down on the low bench contiguous to the confessional, prayed a few moments, and at length approached her face to the little grated window.

Father Gil was uneasy and far from being pleased at this preference. Not that it made any difference to him whether he confessed one young woman more or less. For him, women were weak creatures, requiring, for that very reason, protection and counsel; if he was obliged to live constantly on his guard against them, it was because the Holy Fathers had thus decreed, having in mind, no doubt, their frivolity and their sinful nature. The formidable combat which he had been obliged to sustain was not against sensuality, but against his analytical spirit, full of curiosity, enamored of science. His venerated master, the rector of the seminary, when he saw him devoting himself to the study of mathematics, physics, philosophy, had sounded the cry of alarm. Why study so much? To what did science lead, as its ultimate result? That which was necessary to salvation could be learned in one day, one hour, one minute. The important thing is not to know, but to pray and labor. The virtuous man is the most learned, because he knows the road by which one reaches God, and follows it. These truths soon imposed themselves upon his spirit, warned him against his scientific curiosity, and impelled him to strangle it. Animated by the counsels and the advice of his master, he had



quenched the thirst for knowledge with the refreshment of prayer and penitence.

He came, like him, to love the inexplicable, the absurd, because this satisfies better the longing of an enamored soul.

He preserved against woman in the depths of his being that rancorous disdain which characterizes all mystics, not because of the influence which she may exercise over them, but because of the lamentable influence which she may unfold over other poor souls. On this occasion, the reports which were current regarding this young woman, her reputation as a capricious, eccentric person, awakened in him a certain sentiment of hostility, which was translated into a reproof as gentle in form as it was severe at bottom, when the young woman told him that she had had no motive in changing her confessor.

"I have found nothing bad in him. Only I think that he did not fully understand me." She concluded her declaration, seeing herself hard pressed.

"Every minister of the Lord," replied Father Gil severely, "understands what is a sin, and that is sufficient."

But the confession which followed—long, sincere, fervent, watered more than once with tears—caused the clergyman to change his opinion. He comprehended that he had not to deal with an ordinary soul, with a frivolous woman, but with a Christian of enthusiastic heart like his own, touched with divine love, and longing for perfection. There was, no doubt, considerable incoherence in her phrases. She related ridiculous, even stupid and unworthy,



details at times, but at other times she showed herself grand and strong, trampling her passions under foot, and launching her flight toward the light and the truth. There were moments in which her new confessor thought that he was scrutinizing the soul of a saint ; to such a degree did the impulses, the mystic aspirations of this young woman resemble what he had read in the lives of Santa Teresa, Santa Catalina de Siena, and other glorious mothers of the Church. The narrative of the penitences with which she mortified her flesh made a vivid impression on him, and caused him to form a lofty conception of her.

Without perceiving it, Obdulia ended, that evening, by making a general confession. As she communicated to the new confessor the weaknesses of her temperament, the sinful impulses of her soul, her whole life recurred to her memory ; a very sad life, assuredly ! She was the daughter of the first wife whom her father had had ; she had not known her mother. Her father had married twice since, but her stepmothers had not lasted long. It was said in town that the wicked hunchback tickled his wives to death. This monstrous idea, which allured the imagination of the vulgar herd, was hurled on Obdulia's ears by her companions at school, to make her angry. Oh, how much she had suffered through listening to them and observing the scorn, mingled with terror, which her father inspired. He was loving and indulgent to her. The poor girl did not understand the reason for such scorn, unless it were the hump which Nature had given him. It appeared



to her, as was natural, a great injustice. Was he to blame for not having been born straight like other people? She still recalled with tears the night on which several intoxicated young men had bound him with bandages, and had ducked him repeatedly in the sea, amid jests and laughter. Poor father! In what a state of wrath and misery he had reached home! What the child did not know was, that these young men had surprised him in an obscure doorway in a very indecorous situation. She was frightened every time that she noted the fear which she inspired in her companions; and when one of these, more kindly than the rest, showed her compassion, she became violently irritated, maintaining that her father was very good and that he loved her dearly. Her constitution had always been poor and sickly, her life had been despaired of more than once. She had suffered since her childhood from violent bleeding at the nose, which left her bloodless, annihilated. For two years, between the ages of twelve and fourteen years, she had been paralyzed in both legs. Her father had taken her to various bathing establishments, but without result; until one day, without knowing in the least how it came about, she suddenly began to walk. Her organism had experienced many other disorders, especially during the period of adolescence; but the most striking, or, at least, that one which most attracted to her the attention of the populace, and which was brought out prominently whenever she was under discussion in the town, was an aberration of the appetite which impelled her to eat the plaster on the walls.



In vain did her father and her teachers endeavor to break her of this vicious habit; in vain did they chastize her, shut her up, tie her hands. At the least lack of watchfulness she began to peel off the plaster and to make deep holes in it.

These and other eccentricities disappeared, when she reached maturity. There was a period, from her sixteenth to her twentieth year, when her health improved notably, and in which she became a dashing and comely young girl. But this flower soon faded. Her health broke down again, and although the strange disorders of the past were not repeated she began to decay visibly, and to suffer divers illnesses. Her friends and even her father attributed these sufferings to her long prayers and penitences. She had been seized with excessive affection for pious practices, for frequenting the sacraments, and remaining for hours in the church. Despite the warnings of everyone, and the entreaties of her father, she would never restrain her piety; it increased every day. It is possible that the influence of D. Narciso played a large part in this matter.

Obdulia had reached the age of eight and twenty without having had more than one love affair. When she was eighteen she had been betrothed to a young fellow from Lancia, who had passed a long time in Peñascosa in the house of one of her friends. Their love had reached the point of formal recognition. The wedding was discussed, the bride prepared her outfit, the day was set. Suddenly the lad's father arrived from the Island of Cuba, and one night he packed him into the diligence and carried him off,



no one knew whither. Since that miscarried marriage there had been nothing. The character of Obdulia, ordinarily cheerful, had, since that time, become melancholy and reserved. Divine love was, no doubt, a consolation to her in this calamity for human love. Her character underwent, at the same time, a strange exaltation. Formerly, any sort of censure had provoked her to laughter and had made no impression on her; now the most delicate remark moved her deeply, caused her to shed copious tears. Her self-love had become so nervous, so excitable, that it felt the slightest shock as though it had been the deep slash of a dagger. Her conscience accused her continually of pride. She sustained a cruel battle against herself, but could not succeed in calming this singular irritability.

Father Gil sounded on that day, and on the succeeding days (for Obdulia confessed in detail), with profound emotion a spirit which was genuinely pious, and which was rendered more interesting to him by his conflict with himself. It was one of those souls which he had only seen described in mystical books. Her ineffable sweetness, the submissiveness with which she received his counsels and warnings, fascinated and at the same time disquieted him, because he distrusted himself deeply, feared lest he might not succeed in comprehending the ardent longings, the sublime secrets of a being superior to all those whom he had hitherto known. He began to lend intense attention to the strange confidences of the young woman, to her scruples, to her joys and terrors, to her visions—for she had visions



from time to time. And it no longer surprised him that the other confessors had not understood her. He recalled what had happened to Santa Teresa, and with that example before him, he resolved not to despise as ridiculous certain details, signs of conscience always alert, nor to consider as hallucinations and tricks of vision the things which might very well be real favors of Heaven.

That which impressed him most in the piety of his new penitent was her eagerness to mortify her flesh. She treated her body without compassion, a body as delicate as the shoot of a flower. She rose many times in the course of the night, to pray; at daybreak, on the dampest and coldest days in the year, she left the house to go to church, where she passed hours on her knees; she fasted with a rigor which he had never beheld even in his ascetic master of the seminary, prolonged, terrible abstinences, which it seemed impossible to endure; she wore haircloth on her arms and legs, and scourged herself on Fridays and on the eves of the appointed holidays. The young priest had never felt this alienation from the flesh, this hatred of the beast. In vain had his director sought to inculcate it in him, in vain had he labored all his life to acquire it. All was useless. Corporeal penitences pained him, overwhelmed him to such a degree that he was compelled to cease almost as soon as he began. He maltreated his spirit with great valor, he quenched in it every aspiration, every desire which seemed sinful to him, he humiliated it on every occasion; but he feared physical pain like the most



sensitive damsel; he accused himself of it to his confessor, and deplored it in his long and fervent orisons. Hence the harsh penances of the young woman caused him unlimited admiration.

Everyone admires most that which he lacks. Never had he felt himself so humiliated or doubted so of his own virtue and his salvation. And accepting it as a warning from Heaven, he resolved to enter afresh upon this path of perfection, which has been trodden by so many who really desire to draw near to God. Encouraged by the example of this pious damsel, he began to maltreat his flesh as she maltreated hers; each one of her confidences served him as a model. He desired to fast rigorously also, to rise from his first sleep and pass an hour on his knees before the cross; he tried to wear haircloth to scourge himself. It was a terrible combat with his nature, the pure and tranquil nature of a man without passions, who consequently does not feel the necessity for reducing them to subjection by dint of blows.

His admiration for the virtuous damsel impelled him not only to take her as his example, but also as an adviser. He was so humble and innocent of heart that he felt ashamed at being obliged to direct and reprove a person whom, at bottom, he considered his superior. Little by little, mutual confidences began. As the new ecclesiastic had no confessor in Peñascosa fitted to conduct his mystical education, he unconsciously opened his breast, and communicated to the young woman his joys, his triumphs, and his discouragements in the way of



salvation which he had traced out for himself. It was a spiritual friendship, in which no other subject was treated except the service of God, in which they passed long spaces of time in sweet converse upon the things of Heaven. Neither were a few innocent jests lacking in their conversation, which enlivened them for a few brief moments.

"When you get to Heaven," said Father Gil with a smile, "sitting greatly at your ease in the seat which belongs to you, how little you will recall your poor confessor, who will be suffering in Purgatory!"

"Do not say that, father! If you do not go straight to Heaven, who will?"

"Oh, no!" replied the priest with a sigh. "You have formed a very mistaken idea concerning me. . . . I am an unworthy sinner. . . . I shall give God infinite thanks if He raises me from Purgatory, though I remain there thousands of years."

And the virtuous clergyman said it with all his heart. He believed in good faith that, because it was not possible for him to lacerate his flesh, he did not possess solid virtue, and he rejoiced from the bottom of his soul that he had stumbled upon a being who did enjoy that privilege. There frequently recurred to his memory the example of Father Gracián, whom Santa Teresa had helped so greatly on the path of perfection by her virtues and counsels. His platonic love for asceticism impelled him to encourage instead of prudently repressing that of his client. Every mortification which the latter inflicted upon herself, and came, blushing and trembling, to relate to him in the confessional,



caused him profound satisfaction, appeared to him a triumph over sin, and created the illusion that a part of the victory must be attributed to him.

Many and varied were the things which the valorous damsel inflicted upon her flesh in the space of a few months. As corrupt men cudgel their imagination in search of fresh pleasures, so she excelled in the invention of divers torments for her delicate body. The approbation of her confessor, the eulogistic phrases which escaped from his lips in spite of himself, undoubtedly heated her fancy and spurred on her impetuosity. One day she passed twenty-four hours without taking any food; another day, she sprinkled ashes in the dish she liked best; on another, she put on a chemise of coarse wool next her skin; on another, she scourged herself until the blood flowed, etcetera.

On a certain evening she approached the confessional with the most radiant of faces, with intense delight in her large, black, mysterious eyes. She had just won a fresh triumph over the enemy, and she was anxious to impart it to her confessor. But he, instead of entering into mystical converse, as on other occasions, and taking an affectionate interest in her penances, in her struggles with the flesh, restricted himself severely to her sins. Possibly it was a moment of melancholy or concentration of thought with him. He maintained an attitude of reserve, speaking little, treating her almost like a stranger.

This reserve made an impression on the young



woman. She found herself precisely in one of those moments of expansion in which spiritual joy overflowed sins. She intended to make her virtuous confessor a participant in it, but the latter did his best to remain silent and to abbreviate the confession. The young woman rose at length, sadly, unable to repress a movement of vexation. She took a few steps through the chapel, which was deserted. Suddenly, unable to conquer the desire to let her confessor know the terrible penance which she had executed, she approached the confessional once more, not the window but the door.

"Father," she said, in a trembling voice, stifled by emotion, "I forgot to tell you that last night I performed a penance that is, perhaps, a sin, through being excessive."

The young priest raised his eyes without understanding well, expressing a mute interrogation.

"I burned myself with a smoothing-iron."

The confessor remained silent, gazing at her with inattentive eyes.

"I placed a hot iron against my arm——"

The same silence. Father Gil was either thinking of something else, or astonishment had petrified him.

No doubt Obdulia thought that the former was the case, for she said, with a certain vivacity :

"Yes, señor, I made this burn on my arm——" and at the same time she raised the sleeve of her gown and disclosed an ugly and painful wound on the forearm.

The priest flushed crimson as a poppy, and turn-



ing his head hastily, he replied with asperity as he stared at the panels of the confessional:

“Good, good. Stop it. It does seem to me to be excessive, in fact. Henceforth abstain from performing such penances without first consulting your confessor.”



### III.

AT eight o'clock in the evening, after having supped with D. Miguel, and seen him retire to his bed in the sweet company of his flint-lock pistols, Father Gil sallied forth from the rectory in the direction of the house of his patroness, Doña Eloisa Montesinos. He rarely attended the gathering which assembled at her house in the evenings. He had no taste for it, and the severe regulations of the rector's house did not permit it. But his patroness had complained of his neglect; it even seemed to him that she had grown colder toward him. Fearing lest he might be taxed with ingratitude, and really grieved, since he professed tender and respectful affection for the kind woman, he resolved to go more frequently, representing it thus to the rector.

The rain of a violent squall beat in his face as he stepped outside of the door. He opened his umbrella, but a few paces further on the wind, which was blowing a hurricane across the Field of Discouragements, turned it wrong side out. Finding it impossible to close it, and feeling himself seized violently by the hurricane, the young vicar took refuge in the enormous black porch of Montesinos. He never passed it without feeling a certain quaking of fear and curiosity. In that gloomy palace dwelt a mysterious man of whom a thousand



strange stories were related, to whom were attributed, moreover, scandalous ideas and phrases regarding religion and its ministers. The young ecclesiastic hardly knew him. Don Alvaro Montesinos had passed nearly the whole of his life in Madrid. It was only two or three years since that he had come and established himself at Peñascosa. He lived in almost absolute retirement, strolling now and then, but rarely, on the seashore, entirely alone. The rest of his days he passed in the house, reading and writing impious articles, it was said. The clergy of Peñascosa spoke of him with rancorous disdain, which Father Gil had come to share without knowing him.

He reduced his umbrella to order as best he might, and as the gusts of wind had subsided for a moment, he emerged from the porch, but not without casting a glance of fear and hostility at the great black door in its depths, at whose top burned sadly a small oil lamp behind a tiny, grated window. He emerged from the Field of Discouragements, and once in the street of the Quadrant (this was the name of the only great and inhabited street of Peñascosa), the wind no longer blew so violently and he was able to make use of his umbrella and reach the house of Doña Eloisa, situated on the Square, without getting seriously wet.

The dwelling of D. Martín de las Casas was antique also, but considerably altered, much smaller than that of his brother-in-law, with all the conveniences and additions exacted by modern requirements: a porch of tiles with screen, a well-made staircase of poplar with a varnished handrail, the



rooms decorated with elegant friezes and papers, and everything very ornamental and charming.

“Glad to see you at last, father! How dear you sell yourself!” exclaimed Doña Eloisa, who had not addressed her portégé as *thou* since he had taken orders.

At the same time she rose and kissed his hand with genuine affection. The same was done by Da. Rita; Obdulia, who had been an assiduous guest of the house for some time past; Marcelino, and also Da. Serafina Barrado, in spite of the sidelong glance which her chaplain, D. Joaquin, shot at her. Da. Marciala and Da. Filomena pretended not to notice him as they talked with D. Peregrín Casanova, and finally saluted him from their seats with a flattering smile.

While the salutations were in progress, D. Narciso, who was leaning against the piano, never took his eyes from his companion—eyes in which aversion and jealousy were plainly legible. Without Father Gil having provoked it, or even being really aware of it, a lively rivalry existed between him and D. Narciso, from whom he had wrested more than half his daughters of confession. God knows that he had done nothing to effect this; on the contrary, rather, it distressed him greatly every time that one of them approached his confessional. But what was he to do? Nothing but confess them, since that was his duty. To lay much stress on their making no change in their confessor was to concede too much importance to the question of persons: it was not in accord with the spirit of the sacrament. But



the chaplain of Sarrió was not aware of his companion's intentions, or, if he was, it did not make much difference in his sentiments. He abode by the result, and this was sad for him. Before the arrival of Gil, it may be said that he alone was encamped among the fair sex of Peñascosa and lorded it over their consciences. The other chaplains cast no shadow upon him. He was the petted child of the pious women. Not one of his jests, his steps, or his gestures passed unnoted: the pious souls who had the good fortune to hear them or witness them speedily took it upon themselves to spread the report of them among his female friends.

Every moment he received undeniable testimony of the lively sympathy and veneration which he aroused in the town: presents of chasubles, of corporals embroidered by dainty fingers, satin collars, etc., etc.; still more substantial offerings of hams, bottles of sherry, tarts and chocolate; D. Narciso's wants, both spiritual and temporal, were admirably supplied. He was a shepherd who fed his lambs happily, leading them gently in the path of virtue toward Paradise and shearing their rich fleece from time to time that they might not become entangled in the brambles.

The appearance of his new colleague came to disturb this delicious mystic Arcadia. The lambs, suddenly smitten with insane agitation, began to leap and rear up as though they heard the tones of an enchanted flute. Neither stoning nor cajoling sufficed to retain the greater part of them. His flock diminished, and he, who had had the force to govern



so considerable a herd, was dismayed now at seeing himself left alone, at perceiving the hostility with which several of his ancient and beloved lambs regarded him. Because not only did the rich foreign and national gifts of former days no longer find their way to his house, but he noticed with profound grief that people had begun to discuss him. It was said in the circle of pious dames, and it reached his ear, that it was a fact that although he had a greater gift of words than the young vicar, the greater part of the time "there was no substance in what he said," and that the other possessed great superiority over him in weight, in natural reason, and learning. There was an occasion when, as he launched one of his most poignant jests, relating as usual to dirty matters, he hardly raised a smile in his auditors, and he learned that one of them, after her departure, had characterized him as coarse and ill-bred. As to corporeal graces, there was nothing to be said, since he understood thoroughly that he could never compete with the delicate and elegant figure of his rival. In short, D. Narciso felt that he was undermined in his very foundations, and he feared he might fall to the ground at any moment. Hence, it is not surprising that the look and the salute with which he greeted the young priest were even less affectionate than the latter had a right to expect. It did not in the least resemble the amiable reception which Saint John the Baptist, a master beloved and celebrated, gave to the young and divine Disciple who was destined to eclipse him in the sequel.

"Don't dispute, woman. Do you happen to know



whether it would be easy for you to go out at night, with the fear of robbers which D. Miguel cherishes?" shouted D. Martín de las Casas from the ombre table, where he was playing with the others, a priest and a layman.

"No, señor; that's not it," said the ecclesiastic, coloring up under the glances of the whole assembly.

"That D. Miguel is not afraid of robbers?" asked Señor de las Casas in an affectedly abrupt tone.

"Yes, he is," replied the young man, smiling gently, and seating himself at the same time beside his godmother. "He must have his own reasons. The rich are those who fear. The poor, like myself, are tranquil."

"But has the rector as much money as they say?" asked Da. Marciala curiously.

"I cannot tell you, señora. I presume that he has, since he pays great attention to his property. His expenses are small, and instead of increasing them he restricts them more and more every day. Where much comes in and little goes out, there cannot fail to be a pile."

"The parish fees must produce a great deal, do they not?" asked the wife of the apothecary on the Square, with still greater curiosity.

"You must understand that in so extensive a parish as this they cannot be small."

"But D. Miguel must remit many of them," replied the lady, with a slightly comical inflection in her voice.

"It is possible, señora. For my part, I have not



seen it," replied the vicar, with perfect ingenuousness.

D. Narciso and D. Joaquin, the chaplain of Señora de Barrado, exchanged a rapid and significant glance.

This chaplain was a slender young man, with roses in his cheeks, the sign of a sickly constitution, vivacious and insolent eyes, a thin nose, small mouth, with a hypocritical and malicious crease. He had been a serving-lad, whom Doña Serafina had taken into her house to run on errands and wait at table, shortly after she had been left a widow. Observing his cleverness, and taking a fancy to him, she had transferred her domicile to Lancia for a time, and provided him with a career by sending him to the seminary.

Joaquin continued to discharge his duties as servant. As soon as he took orders, she made him her manager; at the present time he was her hands and her feet. She never went into the street except in his company; he was her spiritual director and her temporal adviser. A curious spectacle, in truth, this sudden transformation of a servant into the master of his own mistress. She addressed him like a gentleman, always called him Don Joaquin, and, in public, at least, lavished upon him a thousand tokens of respect, thus obliging the servants to treat him likewise.

Da. Eloisa returned to her persistent inquiry, asking in an affectionate tone :

"Then what is the reason of his retreat, you rogue?"



"Señora, I can understand that D. Miguel does not much relish going out at night ; but the principal reason is that on most days I am fagged out, as I rise at four o'clock in the morning. On other occasions, I have to pray a little——"

"You work too hard, father," said Marcelina, a young unmarried woman, who was verging on forty, so people said, ugly, parchment-like, very clever with her hands, and no less so with her tongue. "So many hours of confessional! And then, the sick——"

"Without reckoning the hours which he passes on his knees in prayer," suggested Obdulia timidly. After she had uttered the phrase, she blushed.

D. Narciso darted at her a singular glance, half-ironical, half-aggressive, which the young woman could not see, because she made it a point not to look her former confessor in the face.

Annoyed by these eulogies, Father Gil made a gesture of impatience, and, in order to turn the conversation from his person, he accosted one of the ombre players.

"Señor Consejero, I saw you from the rectory to-day draw up a very large fish with your rod. It seemed to me that it must be a red mullet, but D. Miguel thought it was a perch."

"The rector has better eyes than you. It was a perch," said the gentleman addressed, without raising his face from the cards.

This Don Romualdo Consejero was an old gentleman with a mustache and short white whiskers, a lemon-colored complexion, a brow deeply furrowed,



large, severe eyes, and drooping eyelids. He never smiled. He always spoke in an ill-tempered tone, like a man who has had all his illusions destroyed.

“Red mullet do not come to the pier, Don Gil of the green breeches,” remarked Señor de las Casas, with his customary roughness, not to say coarseness. He was in the habit of calling his former *protégé* by this name.

“Yes, they do, D. Martín of the White Houses,” responded Consejero in a low voice.

The guests laughed, which rather angered D. Martín, who was, as we have seen, a man prone to irritation. “I thought they did not, Counselor of Knaves,” he retorted in an affected tone, looking him fixedly in the face, and, at the same time, throwing on the table a king of hearts.

“Then you thought wrong,” replied the old man, with his eyes still on his cards. “You also thought that this king of hearts was going to triumph, and—you see I trump!”

“You will do it because you are a coarse fellow and acquired evil habits yonder in the direction of Málaga. Here is Father Norberto, who certainly would not have done it.”

“No, no, I am incapable,” said the priest, stifling his laughter, and coughing until he nearly burst; “I do not spring from Peñascosa. What I do is to shorten sail, and risk this point of diamonds of my companion.”

And he laid a four spot on the table.

“Hurrah for the Curé!” roared D. Martín,



throwing down the horseman (equivalent to the queen) and gathering up the trick.

"Friend, I thought that D. Martín would not have the horseman," sighed D. Norberto, addressing Consejero with eyes of anguish.

"You thought so because you are a stupid fellow, and have been so all your life," the other replied with an affectation of naturalness, through which wrath peeped forth.

"But, man of God!" exclaimed the ecclesiastic, preparing to give explanations.

Consejero cut him short with wrathful mien, laying his cards resolutely face downward on the table.

"Man of the devil, I say! How did it ever come into your head to risk a point, when you were not covered?"

A violent dispute arose, which lasted a few moments. The disputes of Consejero and Father Norberto did not occupy much time, because the latter, a good sort of a man, and phlegmatic, ended by holding his tongue, shrugging his shoulders resignedly, and shaking his head at the same time in sign of mute protest. The quarrels which did endure forever were those of Consejero and Don Martín, each being more irascible and obstinate than the other.

D. Martín de las Casas, a retired lieutenant-colonel who had been through the war in Cuba, where he had been wounded in one shoulder, which prevented his remaining in the service, thought himself justified, by virtue of his profession, in



carrying everything with a high hand. Since the year 1873, when he had passed into the body of Invalids, he had not quitted Peñascosa. At that time he was forty-two years of age. His wife rejoiced in this forced retirement, although she regretted that he should return to the bosom of his family with a cotton shoulder. He regarded it as the lofty and exclusive virtue of the military man, to exhibit the same energy as on the field of battle when drinking his coffee in the club. His disputes, his boastings, in this center of recreation, were proverbial in Peñascosa, and the cuffs which he was accustomed to distribute at the end of them. As soon as the terrible lieutenant-colonel arrived, no citizen, however grave and respectable, felt safe. Many gentlemen and wealthy landed proprietors of the town, who up to that time had kept their cheeks immaculate, and did not dream that anyone could attack them, beheld them sealed and reddened, when they least expected it, by the fingers of the ferocious veteran. This caused a slow reflux of opinion among his friends and acquaintances, who had received him cordially on his return from service. Exercise, in this case, did not engender warmth but cold. Little by little they began to leave him in isolation, considering his society dangerous. He saw himself obliged to associate with petty gentry, with ecclesiastics, who, on account of their sacred character, were safe from his over-hasty hands, or seemed so at least. At the club he was nearly always to be seen in the company of two petty clerks in commercial houses,



a professor of music, a superintendent of works, and two or three others of the same rank. They listened to him as to an oracle, and if, occasionally, in the heat of improvisation, he dealt them a box on the ear, they swore a little to maintain their dignity, and eventually resumed their good terms with him.

Consejero formed an exception. He had a disposition that was even worse. In that of D. Martín there was much that was affected and professional: that of the latter was genuine and native. But his advanced age, his physical weakness, and his failings sheltered him from the brutal assaults of his friend. His friend was accustomed to wind up the dispute with a violent gesture of disdain. Sometimes he went so far as to say to him: "D. Romualdo, if you were thirty years younger, I would crush you against the wall."

D. Romualdo lived alone. A son of his, who had been employed in Málaga, had died four years before. He enjoyed a small income, sufficient to supply his small needs, and he had no other occupation than fishing with rod and line, and no other recreation than playing ombre. His whole life was divided between fish-hooks and cards. He passed the entire morning seated on a camp-chair on the pier or on the rocks behind the church, with a broad rimmed hat when it was sunny and an umbrella when it rained; in the afternoon, ombre at the club until four o'clock, when he took to his rod again. At night, ombre at the house of D. Martín, in company of the latter and of D. Norberto.



The latter was an ecclesiastic, who might have been taken for about forty years of age, although he was considerably past fifty, corpulent, robust, high-colored, with admirable teeth, eyes round and prominent, a thin nose, not a gray hair in his head nor a wrinkle on his face. He spoke little and laughed much. Everything pleased him: he lived in a continual spasm of joy and wonder. He applauded every insipidity of his friends as the most witty of jests to the point of beholding his belly shake with the fits of laughter. And he laughed in good faith, without the slightest hypocrisy or adulation, which, as is logical, flattered the self-love of those around him. For this reason, perhaps, Father Norberto enjoyed general sympathy in town, and was not disliked by his colleagues. He had but three passions: stewed tripe, ombre, and another of which we shall speak further on. When there was tripe for dinner or supper in any of the houses which he frequented, everyone knew that it was the rule to invite him. He helped himself to two or three heaping platters and unbuttoned his cassock, his brow began to steam, and they were obliged to allow him to repose for an hour on a bed; otherwise he ran the risk of bursting like a bomb. Consejero was accustomed to say that every day he ate more tripe and played ombre worse. And he never uttered this phrase that the good clergyman did not writhe and stifle with laughter. Jests never grew stale for him.

The ladies speedily turned their attention from the ombre players when the latter began to dis-



pute. There was a bit of a quarrel of this sort every evening.

"And you also, D. Narciso, were not here either yesterday or the day before. What has become of you? Do you also pray at night?" said Da. Marciala, who was knitting a stocking near the table of the card-players; from time to time she raised her hands toward the players' light to pick up a stitch which she had dropped.

"No, señora, I am not much of a praying man. I do not possess the virtue of prayer. On the other hand, I abstain from certain vices, such as murmuring against my superiors and colleagues," remarked the chaplain, in an insolent tone, gazing affectedly at the ceiling.

The allusion was aimed straight at the vicar, who had just spoken of the rector's avarice. Thus he understood it clearly, and if he had not understood it the eyes of the people about him would have betrayed it. In the presence of this brutal attack his face flamed like a live coal. The malicious laughter of D. Joaquin and D. Melchor completed his perturbation.

"That's not bad, man! ho! ho! I like that! ho! ho! That's good about abstaining. Very good! You have wit, D. Narciso! Much wit! ho! ho!"

Father Melchor laughed at the top of his voice, in a coarse and insolent manner, glancing alternately at the young vicar and at D. Narciso. Doña Serafina's chaplain also laughed a piercing, petty laugh, which he made a pretense of stifling by raising a handkerchief to his nose. The ladies remained se-



rious and disgusted, comprehending the venomous intention of the chaplain of Sarrió. Only Da. Marciala smiled in his face, and applauded him.

On Obdulia the dart produced a more painful impression than on her confessor. She felt herself seized by a strange sensation of cold, accompanied by a slight trembling; immediately after, flashes of heat rushed to her face, and with them a lively, irrational desire to fling herself upon D. Narciso and scratch him. It cost her an immense effort to control her impulse.

“It is bad to murmur,” said Da. Serafina Barrado, to break up the embarrassing silence which prevailed, disgusted, like the rest, by this unjustifiable attack; “but very often that is taken for murmuring which is not murmuring. People talk of some person—for the sake of talking about something, with no intention of offending him. We even laugh at his freaks, and do not, for this, cease to esteem him, nor do we think ourselves superior to him——”

On reaching this point, her eyes encountered those of her chaplain, who had ceased to laugh, and had riveted on her a gaze cold and cutting as an Albacete dagger. The poor lady stopped short, and only found breath enough to conclude, in a low voice: “At least, that is what happens with me.”

“And it happens with everyone who has a frank heart, señora,” said Obdulia impetuously. “Only the envious, the evil-intentioned know how to gild the pill of venom, and thrust in the dagger, when they appear to be giving a caress.”



The young woman's voice sounded strange, a little hoarse.

D. Narciso gave vent to a malicious little smile, and said in an ironical tone: "Behold how many things concerning moral theology the señorita knows! We shall have to declare her a doctress of the Church, like Santa Teresa."

"*Caramba*, that's not bad either! ho! ho! Doctress of the Church, forsooth! ho! ho! How mischievous that D. Narciso is! ho! ho! ho! D. Narciso is strong!"

"Don't laugh so hard, D. Melchor, or your false teeth may fall out," said the young woman, through whose eyes flashed a lightning of wrath.

Father Melchor stopped laughing suddenly. This ecclesiastic, aged from thirty-five to forty, tall, with regular features, large, expressionless black eyes, and a melancholy, discomposed face, made pretensions to elegance, so public rumor declared, as well as to intelligence, maliciousness, enlightenment, et cetera, et cetera. Obdulia's remark produced a terrible effect on him, because he imagined that no one knew about his false teeth, except God and the dentist in Lancia who had made them. He muttered a few incoherent phrases, but Obdulia continued, without heeding him:

"All that I know about theology is, that priests are obliged to pray, and that to make a boast of not praying is more fitted for the impious than for the ministers of the Lord."

She said it with calmness and naturalness, which made the scratch more incisive and profound.



“And where have you learned so much, *señorita*?” asked D. Narciso, already disconcerted.

“I learned it in the explanatory catechism and in the sermons of the Canon of Lancia—whom people here say that you imitate—but only in your gestures, you know?”

D. Narciso was wounded in the most sensitive part of his being, for he did, in fact, do everything in his power to resemble the Canon, a celebrated sacred orator. He remained silent for several minutes, and was preparing to retort, when the entrance of a new young lady, named *Cándida*, tall, thin, withered and narrow-minded, a member of the codfish family, put an end to the sharpshooting. D. Narciso was in luck, for he stood a good chance of losing in the dispute. *Obdulia* possessed the most lively sort of imagination, and before she had turned her attention to mysticism she had enjoyed among her friends the reputation of being dashing and witty.

*Da. Eloisa* took advantage of the opportunity to change the conversation, which was becoming dangerous. *Da. Teodora* entered in the wake of *Cándida*. She was accompanied by D. Juan Casanova. This upright and majestic cavalier had had the habit, since time immemorial, of visiting *Da. Teodora* in the evenings. When the latter came to the assembly of her friend, *Doña Eloisa*, which happened once or twice a week, he accompanied her along with her maid. D. Peregrín, since his return from his bureaucratic excursion to *Cataluña*, had also acquired the habit of passing a part of every evening at *Da. Teodora*’s house.



It is impossible to solve the problem as to when and how the idea of supplanting his brother in the heart of the well preserved maiden lady had entered the mind of the former official of the civil government of Tarragona; but it is a well attested fact that it did occur to him, and that it developed itself with extraordinary force in a very short space of time. He began to pay her a thousand attentions, to amuse her with the savory account of his reminiscences as an official, to display in her presence a subtle mind, a marvelous facility for puns. Thus he contrived to demonstrate his incontestable intellectual superiority over his brother, advocating the contrary of whatever the latter said, smiling depreciatingly when he spoke; in short, harassing him in a thousand ways. Nevertheless, Da. Teodora offered tenacious resistance to this attempt at supplanting. Although she must have been convinced of D. Peregrín's superiority, as a man of the world and a learned man, she continued, none the less, to lavish upon D. Juan the same tokens of affection as usual. On the contrary, his brother's depreciation served no other purpose than to make her manifest them more intensely than before. This filled D. Peregrín's heart with bitterness. It constituted the strongest motive for rancor among the many which he cherished against his brother, beginning with the latter's stature.

Cándida stepped forward to kiss the hand of D. Melchor, of whom she was the spiritual daughter in confession, and consoled him with the respect, submission, and affection with which she began to talk



to him, for the calamity which had just befallen him.

Hardly were all settled once more, when D. Peregrín, who, up to that time had confined himself to an ordinary degree of loquacity, stimulated by the presence of Da. Teodora, took it into his head to give a dashing proof of his marvelous capacities for rendering any evening party agreeable. He seized by the hair the opportunity with which D. Narciso furnished him, by censuring the badly paved streets of Peñascosa, to say in his snuffling and penetrating voice, in the middle of a pause :

“ When I was Governor of Tarragona——”

“ Tarragona has made its appearance already,” said Consejero in a dull tone, as he shuffled the cards.

Those who were near him heard the exclamation and laughed. The noise reached the ears of D. Peregrín, who paused a moment and cast a cowardly glance at Consejero. Then he continued his anecdote, with decision. The fortnight during which he had had charge of the government of Tarragona, owing to the absence of the governor and the illness of his secretary, was the golden age in the existence of D. Peregrín; the sweet and poetic period whose memory always made his heart vibrate. How many events had occurred in those fourteen days! How many brilliant images of glory and power surged up in his mind at the thought of them! The most insignificant details of this very beautiful dream he had present before him, as though they had just come to pass. He could tell



how many times it had rained during that fortnight, what he had eaten and drunk, what was the color of the trousers which he had worn. For some time, when he spoke of this epoch, he was accustomed to say: "When I was acting Governor in Tarragona," but later on he changed the phrase for the following: "When I was Governor of Tarragona."

And when he was governor, it had come to pass that the local press complained of the neglected state of the streets, ascribing it, along with the other things which were going badly, to the conservative administration. Then he, charged with watching over the government and the party, had summoned the mayor to his room, and had said to him: "My friend——" Here followed a tirade of remarks which D. Peregrín rendered gradually more energetic every time that he repeated it until it was converted into the severest sort of a philippic. The mayor replied to him thus and so (the mayor's reply grew gradually weaker and more insignificant). Then he, without being in the slightest degree discomposed, with the greatest calmness, like a person who is saying nothing of consequence, made answer to him: "My dear mayor, you have the choice between two courses: either suspension or putting the streets in order immediately——" "On the following day, very early, two gangs of laborers were at work on the streets," D. Peregrín wound up, with a cold, malicious smile. This conclusion and the smile were the only things which did not undergo slow alteration in the interesting anecdote.

Either because they had already heard it many



times, or because their minds were not in tune for this class of administrative confidences, the fact is that very few evening assemblies paid any heed to them. The guests chatted with each other, in pairs and in groups of three or four. Cándida whispered with D. Melchor, Da. Eloisa with her godson, Father Gil and Obdulia, D. Joaquin with Marcelina, and Father Narciso with Da. Filomena. We can safely assert that the only persons who really listened to the ex-governor *ad interim*, of Tarragona, were his brother and Da. Teodora, that is to say, those who already knew the details of his administrative rule as well as he did himself. For Da. Serafina Barrados, although she remained motionless, with her eyes fixed on the orator, presented such vagueness in her gaze that it was evident that her mind was very far away from the subject. What this lady was listening to, with imperceptible quivers of grief and wrath, was the sound of her chaplain chatting with Marcelina. For some time past D. Joaquin had been paying much attention to this young woman, his penitent. The distinctions in her favor went to the very soul of Da. Serafina, who evidently desired to monopolize them. Taking into account the fact that the chaplain was wholly her creation, it appeared as though she had a right to him. But he did not think so, or felt a pleasure in agitating her with unjustifiable exhibitions of indifference and rudeness. Not a day passed without the good woman encountering some rebuff or other from her *protégé*. Perhaps she took things wrong; but the priest, knowing the susceptible and jealous



affection which she cherished for him, should have shown more care in avoiding them. Now she noticed very clearly that his asides and whispers were intentional ; perhaps their object was to chastize her for the indirect defense which she had offered to Father Gil, whom D. Joaquin detested.

Da. Marciala, more frank or more choleric, hardly took her eyes from D. Narciso and Da. Filomena, scrutinizing, uneasy eyes, through which lightnings of rage flashed from time to time. In the centers of gossip of the town, it was said that Da. Marciala was in love with Father Narciso. Although this was not credible, in connection with a lady who had shown herself very circumspect and religious all her life, there is no doubt that her familiarities with the clergyman might give rise to crooked interpretations among people inclined to think evil of their neighbors. She had married late in life, when she was already over thirty years of age, D. José María, the apothecary on the square. The latter, who had been a rabid republican all his life, who rarely went to church, and who assembled in his back room behind his shop of a night, a group of democrats (the pious women of the place called them masons), had been changing his opinion, little by little, under the influence of his pious wife. He began by withdrawing from politics, and dropping his subscription to *The Insurrection* ; then he proceeded to eliminate from his assembly the most extravagant and dangerous persons ; then he was seen to exchange courteous salutes with various priests. Finally, when a mission of Jesuits came to town, Da. Marciala succeeded



in getting him to confess to one of them. Since that day a complete and radical change had been effected in the life of D. José María. The ferocious republican, the subscriber to *The Insurrection*, was transformed into an associate of St. Vincent de Paul, brother of the Sacred Heart. He shone in processions, mounted guard over the Holy Sacrament, with a scapular on his neck, etc., etc. And he not only practiced all the religious acts of a fervent believer, but he took to being accompanied by ecclesiastics, and to receiving them in his back shop, instead of the impious persons who had formerly gone there; so that, after a time, his shop came to be the center of reunion for the sticklers for tradition in Peñascosa. Such was the meritorious work carried out with singular fortitude and cleverness by Da. Marciala. In this she had been much aided by the counsels of Father Narciso. Perhaps it was for this reason that her soul remained so bound up in, and grateful to her director, that for lack of knowing how to contain herself, she had furnished pabulum to and stimulated the evil tongues of Peñascosa.

She was, as we know, one of those who had contributed to the education and career of Father Gil; but in the desertion which took place in D. Narciso's flock, after the arrival of the former, she had remained faithful. Perhaps she was aided in standing up for him by the flight of Obdulia, of whom, rumor said, she was ragingly jealous, and from all appearances she did not lack reasons. She aspired to take the place of the latter in the good graces of the eloquent and witty priest, and she had almost suc-



ceeded. Unfortunately, Da. Filomena had interposed herself in her way—the widow with whom we are already acquainted, who admired her spiritual director with more modesty and reserve, and lavished upon him in silence and in shadow a thousand delicate attentions which had ended by making an impression upon his heart. This did not mean that he had ceased to consider and attend duly to Da. Marciala ; but for some time, in that quarter, it had been observed that he showed more inclination for Da. Filomena, although never, of course, so marked as he had felt for Obdulia.

In Da. Eloisa's evening assembly a thousand sweet sentiments were in agitation, which were always accompanied by other bitter ones, as shadow accompanies light. Various young unmarried women, whom time and disenchantments had rendered more reflective, several married dames, in whom their husbands had not succeeded in extinguishing the thirst for the infinite, and some widow or other, in need of counsel, assembled every evening around half a dozen priests forming an interesting and touching group. This little world, utterly foreign to the struggles of politics, science, and material interests, represented a delicious oasis in the midst of the general corruption of manners. The perfect submission of these feminine souls to their directors, the benevolence and tenderness with which the latter strove to lead them in the path of virtue, lent to the gathering a tranquil, innocent, and pious character, which was certainly not to be found in the exclusively secular assemblies. There existed



here a happy admixture of the spiritual and temporal ; it formed an approximate image of what the reign of God on earth must be like.

The mystic flock separated, as was natural. Each ecclesiastic had his own spiritual daughters who obeyed and admired him. And they, profiting, like the skillful shepherds they were, by the character and condition of each sheep, were accustomed to stimulate them by means of suitable maneuvers, now flattering their self-love, now mortifying it with jealousy, now with salutary coolness, again with adequate cajolery. It was not all knitting stockings or crocheting counterpanes ; they also paid their homage to music. Father Norberto was the organist of the church, and although he knew but little profane music, he played a few "Nocturnes," and when he did not, he accompanied Father Narciso, who, among his many accomplishments, possessed that of playing on the flute two or three Spanish dances and the Symphony from "Jeanne d'Arc." Marcelina could also sing "The Confident Star," and the "Prayer to the Virgin." D. Melchor knew some sleight-of-hand tricks ; D. Peregrín Casanova seasoned the assembly with well-salted tales ; Cándida recited admirably, on the piano, several moral fables ; and lastly, Father Joaquin played some musical piece or other by scraping his finger nails on his teeth, and imitated the crow of the cock with such perfection that no one could fail to mistake him for the biped.

On this particular evening there was no music. Minds were somewhat distracted. A certain un-



easiness reigned in the assembly, caused by the presence of Father Gil, for whom none of his colleagues, with the exception of Father Norberto, showed any sympathy. The conversation strayed from one subject to another, all of little moment. During a silence, D. Juan Casanova, who held his head on one side, no doubt on account of the excessive weight of his brain, relieved it somewhat by remarking with his customary solemnity :

“Eloisa, I came across your brother to-day, in the promenade of the Atalaya. He wore checked trousers.”

Dona Eloisa sighed, as she always did when the subject of her brother was broached. “He has been rather ill lately. The servant-man told me,” she said, directing a timid glance at the table where her husband was playing cards.

D. Martín and his brother-in-law had had no intercourse for a good while past. They had broken off with each other in a violent manner, on the despicable ground of a piece of domestic furniture which the latter had tried to remove to his house, without any right whatever. D. Martín had thrust his fist in the face of his brother-in-law (how could he do otherwise?), and more than that, he had bidden him defiance. Since that time there had been absolute separation between them. D. Álvaro lived entirely alone in his enormous house, and D. Martín lived with his wife in his. His wife went to visit her brother from time to time, on the sly, unknown to D. Martín.

“He does not appear to enjoy good health,” said



Father Gil, who took an interest in this man, without knowing why.

“Oh, he is extremely sickly and delicate. Only, by taking much care of himself, he may continue to live.”

The ecclesiastics, as usual, when Montesinos was discussed in the presence of his sister, preserved a gloomy silence, with long and clouded faces. If it had been anyone but she, they would certainly have uttered some phrase of indignation or some sarcasm against that impious man, who had scandalized the town with his opinions, and with his conduct. It was with great difficulty that they respected the close bonds of relationship.

A lugubrious silence ensued, because the ladies, comprehending what was going on in the breasts of their spiritual directors, dared not speak. D. Eloisa heaved another sigh, and said with a grieved tone, as though she were finishing a monologue, in a loud voice:

“What a pity that they should have perverted him in Madrid! Álvaro has a good heart, and everyone says that he is a man of talent.”

The ecclesiastics felt themselves aggrieved by these eulogies. One of them, Father Melchor, ventured to say, with a self-sufficient smile:

“Permit me, señora, not to recognize talent in anyone who does not admit the truths of our holy religion.”

“At all events, he was the first in his class, and he passed among his professors for a clever youth.”



"So he must be, señora," said Father Gil, who was disgusted at the aggressive tone of his colleague. "He may have talent, and yet be blinded on some points. Your brother is so, unfortunately, on that point which is of most interest for man. But that is no reason for denying him talent. The great heresiarchs had talent; if it were not so, assuredly they would not have been able to give the appearance of truth to error, and deceive the people."

Although he felt wounded to the quick by this indirect reply, Father Melchor dared not retort, and preferred to swallow his grievance and play the absent-minded. Although they did not acknowledge the fact, all the ecclesiastics in Peñascosa felt the superiority of Father Gil, which they ascribed, of course, to his being the only one among them who had followed an extensive course of theology. But no one attempted to contradict him, for fear of cutting a sorry figure.

The conversation turned in another direction. They chatted in an animated manner over the project of building a new church, near the Square, which had been set in motion by some of the townspeople, and which the rector opposed with all his might, for fear the parish would be divided. The players continued their alternate silences and uproarious altercations. Father Gil remained mute and thoughtful, impressed by what he had just seen and heard. The face of Montesinos, whom he had not seen more than three or four times in his life, and that from afar, floated before his imagination, awakening in it a lively curiosity. The affirmation of Da.



Eloisa, that he had always been the first among his fellow-scholars, contributed to make this man greater, not to say more interesting, in his eyes. A vague, indefinite desire to approach and conquer him dawned in his mind. When the arrival of D. José María, the apothecary, and of Osuna, gave the signal for the breaking up of the assembly, this idea was still wandering through his brain, in search of form.

The night was cloudy and gloomy. The sky let fall persistently a fine, cold rain. At the door of the house the visitors parted: the majority of them remained in the vicinity of the place, others proceeded along the street of the Quadrant. They separated gradually, all along it, until there remained only Father Gil, Osuna and his daughter, the only ones who lived in the Field of Discouragements. Obdulia maneuvered to get Father Gil to shelter her with his umbrella. The hunchback walked behind, satisfied to escape the humiliation of having his daughter shelter him, as always happened, owing to the great difference in their stature.

They walked for several moments in silence, listening to the distant roar of the sea, which beat against the rocks, and the light sound of the rain on their umbrellas. The young woman was waiting for Father Gil to turn the conversation on his altercation with Father Narciso, and intentionally prolonged the silence indefinitely. Perceiving that he was taciturn and abstracted, she ventured to say to him, in a trembling voice:

“Are you angry with me, father?”



"For what?" asked the priest with surprise, suddenly emerging from his meditation.

"For the dispute that I had with D. Narciso."

"Ah! yes; in fact, I was not pleased with the rebellious attitude which you assumed toward him. It is unworthy of a humble and virtuous young woman like you."

Obdulia remained silent, feeling in her heart the censure of her director. Finally, she said, blushing, though no one could see her:

"You are right; I have committed a sin, and I repent of it."

After a long pause, she added humbly:

"You cannot imagine how greatly it disgusts me to witness D. Narciso's envy."

"Envy?" asked the priest in surprise, "whom does he envy?"

"You, father, you," the young woman replied firmly.

"No, daughter, no," said Father Gil, utterly confounded. "I cannot excite the envy of anyone. I am a poor ecclesiastic; a miserable sinner."

"That may all be. I know what I am talking about."

Recovered from his perturbation, the priest now said with asperity:

"I beg that you will not repeat these things, nor even think them. I forbid it. I warn you that it is a question of two priests," he added, after a pause, softening his voice.

Obdulia did not reply. Mute, and with her heart oppressed by a strange pain, she walked on by the



side of the clergyman. The latter addressed Osuna, without turning round. "We shall feel the wind when we reach the Field, Señor Osuna."

"When is it not windy on that accursed Field?" replied the hunchback crossly.

In fact, when they turned into it, a violent squall lashed them in the face, and came near turning their umbrellas inside out. The priest's cassock and the young woman's petticoats fluttered; they found it difficult to advance.

At length they reached the great porch of Montesinos. They wiped their faces with their handkerchiefs, and repaired the disorder in their garments. Father Gil turned to give a curious and scrutinizing glance at the dark portal at whose summit the oil lamp still burned.

"Farewell, Señor Osuna, may you rest well," he said, offering his hand to the hunchback. Then he experienced a moment of indecision; he was on the point of offering it to Obdulia; but troubled by the intense and ecstatic gaze which the young woman riveted upon him, he raised his hat to her, and bowed gravely, saying:

"Good-night, señorita."

He put up his umbrella again and hastily traversed the distance which separated him from the rectory. The eyes of Obdulia, who stood motionless at the door, while her father called, followed him for a time.

Before entering the rectory, Father Gil turned and also remained motionless for several instants. But his eyes did not seek the door into which Ob-



dulia had just disappeared. They went higher, and embraced in one glance the spacious and gloomy façade of the great ancestral mansion which, accustomed to the blows of the hurricane, slumbered grave and disdainful beneath the evil weather. He contemplated it long, attentively. His eyes burned with a fire of mystic delight. It was the gaze of an apostle : eager, tender, clement. Such must have been the expression reflected in Saint Peter's eyes at the sight of Rome.



#### IV.

FROM that night forth, Father Gil thought of nothing else. The fever of apostleship inflamed him to such a degree that it left no corner empty in his brain for any other thought. Within him there arose a subdued struggle between the lively and ardent desire to ennoble his life by the conquest of an incarnate enemy of the Church, and mad, ungovernable fear, though he knew not what inspired it. In his continual pacings to and fro in the room which he occupied at the rectory, while, breviary in hand, he recited the obligatory prayers, he halted frequently at the window, raised the corner of the curtain and directed a timid and anxious glance at the palace of Montesinos. There it stood, gloomy, impenetrable, hostile as a bastion constructed by impiety. The balconies were always closed. The mysterious man who inhabited it must hate the light of the sun as much as he hated the light of faith. The father raised his eyes to heaven, and returned thanks to God from the bottom of his heart, that he had always held him in His hand, and caused him to be born and to live in the luminous region of the holy Christian beliefs.

In vain did he try to learn particulars as to the life and character of this wandering-sheep whom he longed to bring back to the fold. The data which



were furnished to him were contradictory. While his sister and several other persons represented him as a perfect gentleman, a man good at bottom, led astray by mad company and the perusal of impious books; others, who also asserted that they had known him from his infancy, depicted him as a perverse, evil-intentioned being, who always laughed at the misfortunes and weaknesses of his neighbors, insolent and aggressive in words, since his feeble and sickly constitution forbade his being so in action. In this connection, they narrated several anecdotes of his childhood and youth, which confirmed this opinion. Others, finally, regarded him as an unhappy wight, a man whose heart had been filled with gall by disappointments in his literary career, and by profound domestic troubles. It was assumed that Montesinos had gone to Madrid attached to letters and enamored of glory. Instead of these, he had found glacial indifference; this, united to the catastrophe of his marriage, had obliged him to retire again to Peñas-cosa, "crestfallen," as the grave biographers picturesquely express it. And they wound up by asserting that Montesinos exhaled his bitterness and wrath by blaspheming in words, when the occasion presented itself, and by publishing articles in the periodicals and reviews of the *Masons*. Father Gil did not know what to believe. He was inclined, nevertheless, to this last opinion, which reconciled, to a certain degree, the affection of his sister and certain friends with the evil repute which he enjoyed in the town. What did not fail to surprise him was that, while the ecclesiastics and the sticklers for



tradition despised him, the few republicans and Masons in town showed him no esteem whatever. It was said that Montesinos ridiculed them with even more delight than he did the Catholics, and that he had always avoided all intercourse with them.

All this information, which he collected here and there, concealing, of course, his project, was not calculated to dissuade him from it. The impenetrable mystery which enveloped the character of this man interested him more and terrified him more day by day. He knew how important it was to attract a lost soul into the bosom of the Church; but when that soul belonged to a heretic, to its incarnate enemy, the act gained immeasurably in the eyes of God. As he turned the idea over, he several times conceived the project of approaching him directly, of talking to him and convincing him with reasoning and entreaties; but he abandoned it even more promptly, fearing a catastrophe. It was not that it would mortify his self-love in the slightest degree; he was resolved to suffer for God's sake every sort of martyrdom, much more of insult. What he did fear was, that he should be obliged to renounce so noble and glorious an undertaking. Little by little he became convinced that God himself had entrusted it to him in a special manner, that this was the principal task which he had imposed on him, in sending him to Peñascosa. And convinced that the sublimity of the undertaking does not forbid one to adopt the most efficacious means for carrying it to a successful termination, he deter-



mined to communicate it to his godmother, Da. Eloisa, and to ask her aid. Great was the delight of that good woman on receiving this confidence. She applauded in all sincerity this project, which satisfied the most ardent desires of her heart, and she promised to do all that was humanly possible, that the beautiful dream might be realized. Long conversations took place between these two, in which they sought and weighed the means for accomplishing it; finally, they agreed that the vicar should betake himself to the dwelling of D. Álvaro, commissioned by the latter's sister to beg alms for the widows and orphans of several fishermen who had recently perished at sea. By taking advantage of this opportunity, he might sound him, become his friend, and gradually begin the work of his conversion. Da. Eloisa did not doubt the result, confident in the good disposition of her brother, and the virtue and learning of her godson. When she had talked with him occasionally on religion, Álvaro had replied with coarse invective against the ecclesiastics of Peñascosa; some of them he regarded as idiots, others as vicious; he ridiculed all of them unmercifully. But what could he say against this lad, so good, so studious, of such pure and austere habits?

He did not feel so confident. As the day of the visit approached, he grew more agitated and fearful. He prayed earnestly to God that he would give him strength and valor, and he prepared his arguments and even his phrases with exaggerated attention. One morning, after having been for a long



while engaged in prayer, he emerged from the rectory with a firm tread, traversed the short distance which separated him from the palace of Montesinos, entered its dark porch, and pulled the rusty bell-cord. The bell sounded at a distance, infirm and melancholic. The priest's heart contracted, in spite of the courage with which prayer had inspired him. At the expiration of a long wait, an old servant, of sullen mien, made his appearance. At the sight of the vicar, his hard and piercing eyes expressed amazement.

"Is D. Álvaro at home?"

He delayed his answer.

"You can see that he is at home!" he replied at length. "He never goes out."

"And can I see him?"

"Why not?"

"Then inform him that the assistant rector of the parish desires to speak with him, on behalf of his sister, Da. Eloisa."

"There is no necessity. Come with me," the man replied abruptly.

And, after closing and barricading the door with care, he went on in front. The vicar was surprised at the old serving-man's air of authority, and the little heed which he paid to his master's wishes in the matter of receiving or not receiving visitors. After traversing a vast, damp, badly paved courtyard, where the grass grew everywhere, surrounded by rough-hewn columns of stone spotted with moss, they ascended a staircase, also of rough-hewn stone, whose steps were worn with use. On the principal



story they passed through a broad, open corridor, with a wooden floor, in such bad condition that it was necessary to walk with caution, in order not to place one's foot in a hole. Extreme neglect was visible on all sides; the dirty, peeled walls, the floors an inch deep with dust, the ceilings full of flaws; it seemed not like an inhabited house, but like an ancient, solitary abbey. The grand ancestral mansion of the Montesinos was rotting, falling to pieces, and without its owner undertaking the slightest repairs, or even noticing it. In the second story the servant conducted him through several halls, neglected and gloomy, opened at last a glass door, with dirty panes, and, after casting a glance round the interior, said :

“He is not here. He must have gone up to the library.”

They retraced their steps. In the corridor they found a narrow door, and the servant entered it, followed by the priest, ascending a winding staircase more dark and dirty than the rest of the house. When they reached the middle of it, Father Gil heard a dry cough above, which oppressed his heart once more with fear. The library was situated in one of the two square towers which the house had on its sides. There was a small ante-chamber without any furniture, with a wooden door, unpainted, varnished with use, which the old man grasped, saying :

“Álvaro, here thou hast the Señor Vicar, who desires to speak with thee.”

The fright which the vicar bore within him did



not prevent him being amazed at the strange confidence of the servant. A gentleman so wealthy, so noble, so mysterious, addressed as THOU by a servant !

The library was as dirty and neglected as the rest of the house. It was a large, square room, with a vaulted roof, whose walls were concealed at intervals by rough shelves filled with books. Books were also heaped upon the floor without any order or care whatever. Some were bound in ancient boards, others were in very modern country covers, but all were equally the victims of the heedlessness of their owner, and the inclemency of the dust. The room was lighted by two leaden windows without curtains. A modern stove, whose pipe, upheld by copper wires, was thrust through a broken pane, warmed it. Near a decrepit table, covered with a rubber cloth all spattered with ink, in an ancient rawhide chair, sat a man whose face and dress corresponded perfectly with the decorations of the room. He was small in body, large of head, with a pale face, delicate nose and lips, small eyes of an undefinable color, thin hair of a bright reddish hue, diminutive, fleshless hands. He wore a threadbare dressing-gown, a silk kerchief knotted about his neck, and his legs and feet were covered with a traveling mantle as worn and greasy as the gown.

When the door opened he raised his head, and his greenish eyes, spotted with yellow like those of cats, riveted themselves upon the priest with a curiosity that was rendered insolent by the fact that he did not rise more than half-way from his



seat, nor make the slightest inclination with his head. Father Gil had removed his hat, and bowed in confusion and vexation beneath this cold, searching gaze. The servant withdrew and closed the door. After inquiring about his health, the priest was slow in finding words.

"You must have been informed, señor, of the calamity which occurred a few days ago on the sea. Several families have been left without other shelter than the canopy of heaven and of charitable souls. Assured of the charity of this town, I have undertaken the task of begging from house to house. In fulfillment of this duty, and encouraged by your sister, I have taken the liberty to come and request an alms of you, for the poor widows and orphans and for the love of God."

The master of the house continued to stare at him for a few moments longer. Then he drew a key from his pocket, opened a large drawer in the table, took out several gold coins and, extending his hand, deposited them silently in that of the priest. "May God reward you, señor," said the latter.

There was nothing left to do but to withdraw. D. Álvaro spoke not a word, nor did he invite him to take a seat. But to withdraw, without in any manner attempting to put his project into execution, grieved him so deeply that he remained motionless, in spite of the glance of dismissal which the other man kept fixed upon him.

"Your generosity does not surprise me," he said. "Your sister has praised your good heart to me frequently, and I see that she was not mistaken."



"I presume that you have not heard eulogies on my heart from anyone but my sister."

The voice of the heir of the Montesinos was singularly sweet and harmonious, and formed a strong contrast with his melancholy and inharmonious figure. Father Gil, who was rectitude personified, paused for a moment.

"In truth, I have not heard eulogies on you from anyone but your sister," he said at last candidly.

Montesinos did not appear to be displeased with this reply, but his eyes shone with more curiosity, and he once more examined the priest attentively from head to foot.

"As my sister's eulogies have no value whatever, you may draw the inference for yourself."

A slight smile dawned upon his lips as he uttered these words.

"In judging men I do not heed the opinions of men, but of God. Who knows what goodness or wickedness may lie hidden in the depths of the soul? Up to the present time, the only thing that I know concerning you, sir, is that I have not called in vain at your door; that helpless orphans will bless your name and your heart."

The gentleman's eyes quitted the priest abruptly and expressed discomfort.

"The bestowal of a larger or smaller amount in charity has nothing to do with kindness of heart. We give of our superfluity. Are you sure that if I should miss the money which I have just given you, that I would still give it?"



"No, señor; what I am sure of is, that you would do well to give it, even if you did miss it," replied the priest gravely.

The aristocrat gazed at him with still more interest, and reflected for a few moments. Then he shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

"Ps! I do not know to what a degree that is certain. Supposing that my money should serve to allow those orphans to live, it is no great favor that I am doing them. It is more: If we take into consideration that which inevitably awaits them in this life, we may feel sure that I have done them a terrible wrong. To live weighed down with toil, with sufferings, with anguish, and as a wind-up to the festival, a terrible death like that of their fathers yonder in the enraged waves. A fine future! Those poor little creatures may well thank us for the felicity which we are preparing for them."

"Every man has a destiny to accomplish on earth."

"I know that destiny perfectly. To suffer the innumerable sorrows which nature and our fellow-men deal out to us."

"And if we suffer them with patience, and commend ourselves to God, to receive the recompense reserved for the good."

Da. Álvaro made a grimace of disdain, and rising from his seat with signs of impatience, he offered his hand to the priest.

"Señor Vicar, if our conversation is prolonged, it might turn into a dispute. It is always bad breeding to quarrel with the persons who come to



visit us, but in this case, when it is a question of a priest, it would be a real offense."

"Say whatever occurs to you, señor. It is my duty to proclaim the truth without fear of offenses."

The gentleman looked at him again, this time with benevolent compassion, and approaching him and laying his hand on his shoulder, he asked with a smile:

"Let us see, sir priest; if you were God, would you make so perverse a world as this?"

"That question seems more like a mockery," replied the priest, with marks of sadness and displeasure.

"You see how you take offense? What I mean to ask is, if, having it in your power to create a good world, peopled with happy, eternally happy beings, you would, out of caprice, create one filled with sorrows, with sadness, with bitterness; if you would bestow life on a number of poor beings, bad and good, for the pleasure of recompensing the good and punishing the bad?"

"God has not created the world bad, but good. It was the first man who caused all sorrows by his disobedience."

"Ah, yes! The myth of the apple. I do not believe you capable of so ridiculous a caprice, Señor Vicar. What was the object of reserving that apple, above all, when the capricious character of Eve and the weakness of Adam for her were known? But granting that those two deserved punishment, what have we to do with their sin? If a person were to injure you, would you be capable of avenging your-



self on his sons and his grandsons? I do not believe it. You would begin by forgiving the offender, and if you did not forgive him, you would take good care to cause no harm to his children. On these grounds you see that I find myself obliged to consider you as a better person than God."

A flood of crimson rushed to the face of the priest. Astonishment, indignation, hampered his tongue.

"This is nothing more than scoffing unworthily at the holiest of things," he ejaculated at length. "I am surprised that you, who have received a Christian education, should have reached such an extreme degree of impiety."

A sarcastic smile was outlined on the gaunt countenance of the noble gentleman.

"I did, in fact, receive a Christian education; at least as Christianity is understood down to the present time. You see, Señor Vicar, I had a father who was like God. For the lightest fault, the outcome of my inexperience, of my disposition, of my age, he imposed upon me a barbarous, a cruel chastisement. If I fell asleep during the recital of the rosary, blows; if a blot fell upon my written page, blows; if I ran through the house, blows; if I soiled my clothing, blows—always blows! And he never even took the trouble to administer them with his own hand; he entrusted the execution to Ramiro, the servant who conducted you hither, who dealt them out to me in a highly Christian manner, until the blood flowed. But still my father was much better than God in this respect; for Ramiro's blows lasted



only for a time, while those which the devils are to give us will last to all eternity, as you priests assert."

The smile which had strayed about his lips vanished. He remained silent for a while; he was deeply centered in himself. His eyes, fixed on the floor, dilated with an expression of terror. His whole childhood passed in rapid and lugubrious vision before him. His father, tall, thin, with a huge, aquiline nose, curved and cutting as that of an eagle. He had never seen him smile. He had passed half of his life in church, where he let himself fall on his knees with a heavy thud, which made his son quiver (he sometimes thought that his father's knees must be made of stone or iron). He never addressed him except to reprove him, or to exact the fulfillment of some task. He had no friends, with the exception of two or three ecclesiastics, with whom he heard him execrate liberalism and modern impiety. He saw himself, poor child, infirm and sickly, passing two or three hours on his knees in the church, without ever enjoying the pleasure of running about in the open air like the children of the miserable fishermen, without having a companion, to whom he might communicate his innocent thoughts. One day was exactly like another. The sky was always leaden. The sea beating sadly against the rocks. The wind blowing in violent gusts against the panes. And the house silent, gloomy, dirty; resounding from time to time with the slow, measured footsteps of his father. He beheld himself later on, in Lancia, studying the



second course of instruction, lodging in the house of a priest of the same temperament and manners as his father. His companions despised him because of his weakness, his lack of dexterity; the professors regarded him with suspicion, on account of his reserved and melancholy character. And during vacations, there was the return to the gloomy and detestable palace, to the austere rule, to the eternal prayers. In spite of his ardent desire to adopt a profession, he was not permitted to do so. His father considered it derogatory to the heir of the house of Montesinos to mark out a career; he called lawyers shysters, engineers stone-cutters, and professors petty pedagogues. The army pleased him, but his ideas, which clung to the old tradition of government, prevented him sending his son to serve a liberal government. Not being able to serve his king with arms, the life of a noble should consist in rising early to hear mass, casting a glance over his affairs, chatting a while with the steward, playing ombre with the priests, taking a walk with them afterward, reciting the rosary, confessing in detail, and constantly setting an example of virtue and religiousness to plebians, without ever coming in contact with them. But in spite of the great respect which he showed toward the priests and of kissing their hands in public, Álvaro recalled one detail, which had attracted his attention greatly: At the dinner hour the lackeys always served the master and his son before they served the chaplain of the house. The pride of nobility beat much more strongly in the heart of his father than did his religious senti-



ment ; but he understood how to ally them so well, that in the depths of his consciousness he had arrived at the belief that religious feeling was a quality peculiar to the aristocracy, and that by it more than by any other they were to be distinguished from the vulgar populace.

He beheld himself in Peñascosa, leading the life of an unoccupied nobleman, subjected like a child ten years of age to the despotic authority of his father. His imaginative, dreamy spirit could not endure this inaction. He began to read novels by stealth, which were furnished him by a woman who kept a tobacco and snuff shop on the street of the Quadrant. Then he went upstairs to the library, where a priest, the brother of his grandfather, had left a great store of books, and began to devour them. He read Plato, Descartes, Saint Thomas, Fénelon, etc.

He became learned. But when the light of science entered his mind, doubt slipped in also ; what cruel torments it caused him in his sad, monotonous life ; religion alone, the thought of God, the promise of immortality, of another world more just and more beautiful, had sweetened a little the bitterness of the hours. And lo ! all of a sudden he distrusted this sweet promise, he doubted all the truths of religion, even to the existence of God. In the beginning he went about distrustfully, gloomily, fearing lest his father should discover in his eyes his abominable thoughts. Afterward, cruelly tormented, crushed by them, craving a remedy for his malady, a hand which should sustain him before he fell into the



abyss of perdition, he one day summoned the courage to throw himself on his knees before his father and confess them. The old aristocrat was thunder-struck, and, in order to cure his son's madness (that was what he called it), he could devise no other remedy than to counsel him to penance, fasts, mortifications of the flesh of every sort. In his opinion, these doubts arose from nothing but from the rebellions of the flesh, which must be combated with humility and scourging.

He soon overleaped the barrier of doubt, and fell into the field of unbelief. From that time forth, no vacillation; he became more and more convinced every day that there was nothing to hope for beyond this world. His father died, and he confessed to himself with remorse that he did not regret it. He breathed with longing and delight the air of liberty. There was a moment when life appeared to him less horrible; the world wore a sweet smile for him. It was when, with well-filled pockets, he betook himself to Madrid. Science, at first, offered him consolation and occupation. With avidity did he acquaint himself with the latest ideas in philosophy, in history, in the natural sciences; he associated, he discussed with the most eminent men in Spain. And he had the satisfaction of observing, that yonder, in his isolation of Peñascosa, meditating among his ancient books, he had arrived at the same results as the modern philosophers. Then came love; a sweet and intoxicating dream, a divine and penetrating music, which held him suspended, for a time, above the miseries of earth, which recon-



ciled him with life and awakened in his heart infinite hope, the illusion of immortal bliss. The fall from that luminous, enchanting, smiling world was very cruel; one of the blackest pages registered in the history of men, which contains so many black pages.

"For the rest," he said, emerging from his painful reverie, and passing his skeleton hand across his brow, "I have taken the things which you believe in seriously for a sufficiently long space of time. It cost me much pain, many hours of sleeplessness, many tears to part from them. Allow me to laugh a little now, in exchange for those tears."

"So that," said the priest, with badly repressed agitation, "entirely forgetful of the beliefs which suckled you, the holy religion of your fathers, you declare yourself an enemy of God?"

"Yes, señor, an enemy of God and of men. That is to say, it cannot be of God, unfortunately, since he does not exist. If he did exist, judging from his works, he would be a very wicked God. As I cannot be the enemy of God, I am the enemy of men, not to do them harm, but to flee from them, as one flees from ferocious wild beasts. Ever since I was born, they have made me endure many sufferings. Nevertheless, I have never tried to avenge myself on them, because I know very well that they are wicked because Nature or destiny has created them so; they do harm as the wild beasts do it, through the egotism which roars within every animate being. This world is organized for all beings to devour each other. That which goes on with the



fishes goes on with the men ; only we do not open our mouths, and we do not swallow our victim at a gulp, which is, after all, an advantage for him, but we devour him in small mouthfuls, tearing away his flesh until we reduce him to a skeleton. Do not you see me?" he added, with a ferocious smile, pointing to his face. "The fish who has eaten me understood his business. He has left nothing of me but my bones."

Father Gil, more and more astounded, ventured to inquire :

"And you do not think that there exists on the earth a single honest man, a single virtuous woman?"

"Yes, there are some ; but they are exceptional products of nature ; to express it more accurately, they are aberrations of an organism created for evil. Good men suffer the consequences of every aberration ; they cannot subsist. All animals are born with means of defense for the struggle in the combat of life ; some have teeth, others have claws, others have horns, others have wings with which to fly away ; the good man is the only animal who is lacking in means of defense. Not being fitted for fighting, he is irrevocably destined to perish. The only consolation that a good man can have is, that his tormentors are not happy either. He is a poor fly, caught in the immense spider's web fabricated by scoundrels who compose the majority of the human race. Life is a huge fraud for all, for the good and for the bad. Within the universe there lurks an astute, wicked force, which impels us, which



directs us toward a goal unknown to us, and with which we have no concern. It needs us for this mysterious object, and it obliges us to reproduce ourselves. It matters not to it that we are unhappy. For it, the individual is nothing, the species is everything. It works like the owner of a stock breeding establishment, who, before he kills a horse that is no longer of any use to him, forces him to leave a foal behind him. Preoccupied solely with perpetuity, in order that instruments may never be lacking, it deceives us with the lure of pleasure, of ambition, or of pride. You, yourself, who are not working from any one of these motives, are equally an instrument of the race. By occupying yourself with the fate of these poor orphans, by seeking zealously the means for their livelihood, you are unconsciously obeying the orders of that evil force. When the attraction of pleasure does not suffice for the preservation of life, it appeals to the sentiment of compassion which it has placed within us."

Father Gil, who had listened, petrified, in a stupor, at hearing such a series of impious remarks, felt a quiver of horror at hearing such a monstrous interpretation of the sentiment of charity. This quiver was followed by a lively irritation. It required a great exertion of his will not to break out into insults against the blasphemer.

"All that is very well," he said, controlling himself and smiling in a forced way, "but you will excuse me if I ask you a question. In this very afflicting pessimism which you profess, in the deplorable idea which you have formed of the



world of men, in this very brutal atheism itself (pardon me the phrase) which you are so set upon exhibiting, are you quite sure that everything depends on cold, serene reason? Have not your individual sorrows, the unhappy events of your own life, had some influence?"

The feline eyes of the nobleman blazed with wrath; he had been wounded to the quick.

"Ah! that eternal song!" he exclaimed impetuously. "When people cannot attack a theory, they scrutinize the motives of the person who maintains it. What do you mean to prove by that? Let us assume that the world is a paradise, that all men except myself are happy, and that my pessimism depends wholly upon my own misfortunes. Shall I, for that reason, cease to affirm and declare the evil which has fallen to my lot? Shall not I, a wretched creature, have a right to describe God (in case there is one) as wicked, since, though he was able to make me happy, like the rest, he has made me unhappy? Every man on earth who suffers can demand of God, as Job did, 'When did nothingness ask existence of Thee.' As for the rest," he added, adopting a depreciatory, insulting tone, "since you knew from the time you entered these doors to what you were coming, I do not wish to discuss with you, for I should become angry. I am persuaded that the religion in which you believe is nothing more than a combination of hypotheses, innocent as all those of the other religions invented by the misery and cowardice of men, who cannot resign themselves to die



outright, like the other animated beings, as experience irrefutably teaches us, who cannot convince themselves that they were born to sorrow. And I do not believe this through caprice, but after having studied and meditated upon the subject extensively; after having followed carefully, step by step, the history of the most important religions. If there were any choice among them, it certainly would not be Christianity, which is one of the most melancholy and senseless. That has happened to me which happened with Goethe: the cross gives me spasms in my nerves. Neither Saint Thomas, nor Saint Augustine, nor Saint Fénelon, nor Pascal, has convinced me. Consequently, no one of you will convince me. You possess no more respectability in my eyes than that which your character and deeds lend you. I laugh your science, and that of all your colleagues, bishops and archbishops, to scorn."

His eyes flashed proudly, as he gazed haughtily down upon him; but these eyes suddenly softened at the sight of a tear trembling in those of Father Gil.

"Forgive me, Señor Vicar," he made haste to say, approaching him, "if I have offended you; I have a bad disposition—I am easily irritated."

"Farewell, señor; farewell," replied Father Gil, pressing the hand which Montesinos offered him. "You have not offended me; it is God whom——"

"Then I am content, for that is of no consequence," he replied with a smile. "Farewell for the present. You know that you have here a friend and a house at your service."



## V.

HE came out of that accursed house in an indescribable state of confusion and sadness. He did not wish to go to the house of Da. Eloisa, who was awaiting him with impatience. When he saw her later he explained the unfortunate interview in a few curt words.

During several days he made efforts to banish from his mind that disagreeable interview, and even the image of the blasphemer. Disconcerted, crushed by so brutal a reception, he did not imagine that there could be any means of combating that raging devil, gorged with wrath and impiety. But the latter's words rang day and night in his ears, pursued him, pained him like cruel lashes. He was acquainted with several arguments of the heretics; those which were contained in the books of theology, and which the author, on the authority of the Holy Fathers, always refuted victoriously. He knew of the existence of rationalists, but his information was vague and deficient. He had never seen atheism expressed in so cynical a manner. He had not thought that there was really anyone who was not really convinced that God did not exist.

Nevertheless, when the impression was dispelled, after the lapse of a certain time, he could not but think that he had been very quickly crushed. Too



well he knew that the sheep would not yield itself up for good at first sight ; that he was going to encounter a well-informed, erudite man, who could not be attracted by a brace of commonplaces. Then, why be cast down so promptly? Why give up as conquered without fighting? Father Gil confessed to himself, with his customary and sincere modesty, that he was not prepared for this combat. Beneath the ironical and cynical phrases of the heir of Montesinos, he divined a long study of the materials, a well meditated and complete system. In order to combat this system, and the arguments which impiety might bring forward, it was necessary to know them in advance, to discuss and ponder them previously in his own mind, in order that immediately on their appearance in the mouth of the unbeliever, he might be able to destroy them, reduce them to dust. For this reason he did not dare to undertake again this coveted conversion.

But the more difficult it was for him, the more obstacles he encountered in his path, the more lively was his desire to accomplish it. He had observed, in the lives of the saints, that they never acknowledged themselves conquered in the contest with sin. Enormous, impossible as the enterprise might be, they attacked it again and again with increasing ardor, trusting solely to the aid of God. He must do the same. If he lacked strength, God would lend him strength. He must toil unweariedly, until he had brought about the return of the prodigal son, until he had destroyed this focus of impiety, which might infect the healthy hearts of



Peñascosa, until he had removed this stumbling block.

He decided in his own mind to return to the charge. But this time he would go better prepared; he would be perfectly posted on all the arguments of the heretics, and be prepared to reply to them. He communicated his project of conversion to his master, the rector of the seminary at Lancia, and entreated him to ask the bishop for permission to read forbidden books. The rector did not delay long in forwarding it, but in the letter which accompanied it he did not appear very enthusiastic over his disciple's undertaking. The ascetic priest enjoyed more perfecting believing souls than enticing those which were definitely in the claws of sin.

The first thing that Father Gil chanced to read was the "Life of Jesus," very popular at that time among the godless, and which was always mentioned with disdain, mingled with terror, in the seminary. He read it with profound sadness and grief. The heretic who had written it regarded our Lord Jesus Christ as a man. He lavished upon him a thousand derisive eulogies, displayed an exaggerated admiration for him, but this was in order to demonstrate the better his exclusively human condition, and discharge with more effect the venom of impiety. The book was crammed with fabulous stories. "Christianity," it said, "is an historical phenomenon, and as such it should be studied in a historical manner." This was, evidently, absurd, since Christianity signifies the redemption of the human race by the Son of God; it is the revelation of divine



truth. The author demands that the narrations of the Gospels shall be examined in conformity with the same principles with which any other tradition is judged, that results shall not be imposed beforehand on criticism, and that criticism shall be left free from preconceived hypotheses. This was another absurdity, because, how can we apply to faith, to the word of God, the same principles as to the deeds and words of men? In this manner he proceeded to answer the arguments of the rationalistic author one by one, and to demolish them.

Busied with this internal discussion, and eager to make it external, as is the case with everything which fills and embraces our spirit, he ventured to pay another visit to the head of the house of Montesinos. The latter received him very well, with exquisite amiability, as though his conscience was stung with remorse for his past rudeness. They talked of indifferent matters. Montesinos took occasion to let him know that he had very good information as to his character, that he was acquainted with the virtues which adorned it. Father Gil flushed under these praises, and replied, with a melancholy smile, that what he desired at that moment was to have a great deal of talent, and much knowledge, in order that he might convince him of the truth of revelation.

“Of what revelation?” the nobleman asked him, smiling also kindly.

“Of what revelation?”

“Yes, of what revelation? for there are several; the Christians, the Buddhists, the Mohammedans,



the Jews, all believe that their religion has been revealed by God."

"I speak of the only true one, of the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ."

"And what are your grounds for believing that this is the true one, and that the others are false?"

"The ground that the others are full of monstrous, irrational things," replied the priest imperiously, "the ground that the religion of the Crucified One satisfies all the aspirations of our feeling and our reason."

"Take care, Señor Vicar!" exclaimed the nobleman, with a merry laugh, "you are making revealed truth depend upon the assertion of the reason; you are proclaiming the supremacy of the reason, which is a heretical proposition——"

"What? What?" cried the priest, stupefied.

But Montesinos changed the subject of conversation abruptly. He dared not insist.

It cost him a great effort to swallow this pill. For several days he thought of hardly anything else. The idea that, without perceiving it, he might fall into some error condemned by the Church, disturbed him greatly. Indubitably, reading heretical books, thinking too much about the foundations of religion, was like playing with fire. He would do better to let the dice alone, and allow the devil to carry off Montesinos. All the saints who have lived in the world, and the divine ordinances which command us to love our neighbor as ourselves, cried out against this resolution. On the other hand, he had a foreboding that his inward agitation was not going



to cease. The ideas in the "Life of Jesus" and those which he had heard from Montesinos, seethed confusedly in his brain, and did not immediately calm down in consequence of an exertion of his will. Why should he not penetrate deeply into the examination of the origins of the Christian religion? Why should not he know, in its smallest details, the data of discussion, in order to confound, to pulverize any rationalist who should present himself, however learned he might be? There was no danger whatever in this. A little knowledge estranges from God; much knowledge brings one closer.

He devoted himself with ardor, with frenzy, we may say, to study. Montesinos, with whom he began to be intimate, placed his library at his service. He read without cessation, with profound attention, the most prominent writings concerning critical investigations of the New Testament, and the history of the dogmas. He drank deep draughts of the poison of heresy without perceiving its taste, with the hope that when he had drained the cup he would be perfectly tranquil, assured forever of the senselessness and the wickedness contained in everything which was opposed to the Church of Christ. But, alas! this was not the way it turned out. At the expiration of a few months doubt reared its fetid head in his afflicted spirit. For many days he would not confess it to himself, striving to deceive himself, and turning away his eyes that he might not see it. Nevertheless, the moment came when this was no longer possible. The infamous thing had gone on twining itself cautiously into his soul,



and had insensibly taken complete possession of it. What stupor! What a horrible affliction!

The Bible is the word of God. That which God prompts is the infallible truth. In the Bible there cannot exist false or contradictory narratives. This is what the priest repeated to himself every instant, even aloud when he found himself alone.

If the Scripture is not of Divine origin, can it be explained that Isaiah could prophesy that Jesus should be born of a virgin, that it would take place in Bethlehem? How could the same Isaiah, a century and a half before Cyrus, point him out as the liberator of the Jews? How could Daniel, under the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, prophesy the birth of Alexander the Great, and many particulars of his history?

To whom did Father Gil propound these bruise-producing questions with such violence when he was alone? To an invisible heresiarch, who answered him, hissing like a serpent: "The different books of the Bible are the work of men, like all the others to which a divine origin is attributed: the Koran, the Vedas, etcetera. They are compilations of writings of different sorts and epochs. The books attributed to Moses and to Samuel are much later compilations, into which fragments of different epochs have been introduced. The same thing has come to pass with the books of the New Testament. Isaiah had no thought of Jesus, in his son of a virgin. The last third of the prophecies of Isaiah proceed from a contemporary of Cyrus, and the whole book of Daniel from a contemporary of Antiochus, for whom



he could very well prophesy that which had already taken place."

Father Gil covered his eyes and tore his hair, horrified at this sacrilegious dispute. He, a minister of the Most High, seeking objections and contradictions to the words of the Holy Spirit! He deserved that the earth should yawn suddenly and swallow him. Those infamous books that the heretic Montesinos had lent him were to blame. Carried away by holy indignation against them, without pausing to consider that they did not belong to him, he collected them all one day, made a pile of them in the courtyard, and set fire to them. D. Miguel, who was very far from suspecting what was going on in the mind of his assistant, applauded the bonfire from the balcony with loud laughter. He was more tranquil when he no longer had in the house these wicked enemies of his salvation. He completely abandoned reading and devoted himself to the duties of the confessional, which he had, in some measure, neglected. And proceeding with his doubts of historical criticism as the saints of old proceeded with the temptations of flesh, he began to mortify himself pitilessly. He, who up to that time had shown himself weak and cowardly in the path of perfection, now pursued it intrepidly, eager to pay with the pains of the body the scandalous rebellion of his mind. He was much comforted and aided at this critical moment by the example of the pious daughter of Osuna. Every day he discovered in the pure soul of his penitent fresh treasures of goodness and Christian perfection. He believed that he



stood in the presence of one of the elect of the Lord, consecrated by the Church and adored by the faithful of all Christianity. Santa Teresa, Santa Isabel, Santa Catalina, Santa Eulalia, the blessed Margarita de Alacoque. The same peculiarities which he had read in the lives of these saints he now observed in his spiritual daughter; the same thirst for penances, the same scruples and fears, the same humility, the same divine favors.

For Obdulia, filled with shame, as though she accused herself of a grave sin, trembling with emotion, had confessed to him that, from time to time, she suffered from swoons when she was at prayer, fell suddenly to the earth, and, during the brief moments when she lay insensible, she sometimes beheld Jesus in the clouds, surrounded by angels; she heard divine music, intoxicating music. At other times she noticed a tall, strong, handsome angel, with two immense, transparent wings, who drew near to her and laid his hand gently on her head, saying: "Persevere." At other times, and they were most frequent, she merely perceived a great light, which bathed her completely in pleasure, without seeing anyone; but she felt that she was accompanied, as though all the saints of heaven, male and female, were hovering invisibly around her. In the beginning, like a prudent confessor, he feigned to attach no importance to these visions; she might very well be mistaken; the devil very often invents such scenes to deceive incautious souls, by way of instilling into them the poison of vanity and pride. Obdulia persisted,



nevertheless. Her swoons grew constantly more frequent and prolonged, her visions more intense. She asserted, with barely repressed fire, that she saw Jesus, that she saw the angel. Father Gil still doubted, or feigned doubt, making a gesture of disdain every time that the young woman related, with trembling lips, these favors of Heaven. There was but one sign by which it might be known whether they came directly from God; when the soul has been brought, through them, to such a pitch of perfection, that the slightest, most venial sin causes as much grief and as many tears as the most infamous and mortal. But there still existed in her the rebellions of the flesh; self-love still showed itself. He could not regard these hallucinations as divine. Obdulia felt great discomfiture at this severe and reserved attitude.

But little by little the seal which the priest required to recognize the celestial origin of her visions began to appear. The spirit of the young woman was purified of all impurities. Her devotion to religious practices, especially to the sacred bread of the Eucharist, grew greater day by day. She melted, she was poured out in divine love, frequently breaking out into exclamations of enthusiasm, into incoherent phrases, as though she were mad. And withal, her humility and submissiveness were so perfect that a glance from her confessor sufficed to abash her, to make her tremble and beg forgiveness for the most innocent acts. At last there was nothing left for him to do but to bow before the will of God and confess his presence. He did so



with great pleasure. After his sacrilegious doubts he was eager to see the proofs of Omnipotence and infinite and goodness ; he desired to submerge himself in the ocean of the inexplicable, of the supernatural, to escape that minute and wicked criticism which withers up everything. He considered himself happy, free from it, in having beside him so clear an example of the miraculous power of God. He believed that God was giving him warning in this manner, in order that he might not fall into temptation again, that he had sent him a beacon to light up the dark places of his soul. He constantly had in mind what had happened with Father Gracian, whom Santa Teresa had helped so greatly in the path of virtue by her immaculate conscience. And in the bottom of his heart there sprang up a great respect, equal to an immense gratitude, toward this pious woman, who had released him from the clutches of the demon. He listened attentively to the prolix narrative of her visions, and, armed with holy emulation, he undertook anew, with more ardor, if not more faith, the path of mortifications which he had abandoned while he groaned in the slavery of doubt.

Obdulia, who with grief had seen him absent-minded during the last few months, felt a great joy at finding him once more attentive, solicitous, listening to her for hours as she unbosomed herself of the petty preoccupations of her spirit without waxing impatient. It was a blissful return to the sweet confidence, to the mystic conferences, to the familiarities of the past. And as usually happens in



similar cases, the bond between them was drawn closer; that is to say, confidence and affection were greater. After a short time he began to consult his penitent, not only upon pious subjects, but also on domestic matters; she became his spiritual and temporal adviser. The devout young woman penetrated all his thoughts, sometimes even before they had formulated themselves with precision in his brain.

"Father, you are in a bad humor to-day; that is because you could not say mass at the altar of the Conception as on other occasions. You have black circles under your eyes. It is evident that you have passed the whole night in prayer. I know why you said mass later on Sunday; you hoped that Da. Eloisa would come. That band presses your neck too tightly. It is very uncomfortable for you. Would you like to have me put it in order?"

Their lives continued insensibly to merge together. Not only did they have a little chat nearly every day in the confessional, but in the afternoon they met in the church at the rosary, and in the evening, frequently, at Da. Eloisa's house. Moreover, from time to time, the young woman went to the rectory to consult him about some pious matter, such as a novena, a meeting of the society, etcetera, although it always cost her an effort because she was very much afraid of D. Miguel. She had taken it into her head that the latter regarded her with an unfavorable eye, that he despised her. And perhaps she had reason to think so.

This confidence sinned by its excess, on occasion. At least, so thought Father Gil. Obdulia allowed



herself, from time to time, familiarities which shocked him, and, on occasion, disturbed for a moment the limpidity of his conscience. One day she spoke to him of her economical exigencies. Her father gave her but little money for the expenses of the household, and, as she had the vice of charity, of giving alms at haphazard, she had contracted debts which mortified her. There was one shopwoman in particular to whom she owed twenty duros, who annoyed her every hour, and threatened her to tell her papa. Could not he procure that sum for her, for a short time? The priest did not possess the money either, but he borrowed it from his godmother, and handed it over, flushing crimson. She accepted it without any shame whatever, as the most natural thing in the world. On another day she brought to the church a package of letters from the lover she had had, that he might read them.

Later on she begged from him the scapular which he wore on his neck, insisted so strongly, and adduced such pretexts, that she ended by obtaining it. On the following day she confessed to him, with a smile, that it had not been for the purpose of placing upon a friend who had just died, but to wear on her own breast. These things wounded and vaguely troubled the young priest. The verbal jests which the pious woman sometimes permitted herself, also transgressed, at times, the bounds of propriety. One day she said to him suddenly:

“Do you know what I am thinking of, father? That the angel who often comes and lays his hand on my head has eyes very much like yours.”



And she broke into a laugh as she said it. The priest laughed also, and flushed. Then he instantly became serious and displeased.

A strange event which scandalized the town intervened, in an indirect manner, to render their relations closer, and to disturb Father Gil. One night he was awakened in alarm, by the sound of a detonation in the house. He rose with a bound, and ran to the room of D. Miguel, whence he fancied that the sound had proceeded. On arriving there he paused in amazement, petrified with terror before the scene which presented itself to his vision. In the middle of the room a man was wallowing in a pool of blood, while D. Miguel, standing on his bed, was brandishing a pistol triumphantly, and shouting with a ferocious smile: "One is fallen! One is fallen!" The dying flame of a candle, which lay on the floor, lighted up this weird scene.

The state of the case was this: While the rector was in bed, a man had made his way into his sleeping room, had awakened him, and had ordered him to hand over his money. D. Miguel, without moving, thrust his hand into his waistcoat, drew out the key and threw it into the middle of the room. Then, while the thief was picking it up, he had pulled one of his pistols from under his mattress, and had discharged it at him, leaving him outstretched. The bullet had penetrated his loins. The vicar, overcoming his alarm, hastened to render him spiritual succor. Three hours later he expired.

This affair was much commented upon, and in very different manners, in the town. Some people



approved the conduct of the rector. He had a right to defend himself from a highwayman, for God knows what the man would have done after he had robbed him. Others, and they were in the majority, censured him severely. A priest cannot behave like other men in such a case. He is a minister of Jesus Christ and must always proceed with charity, even in a matter of legitimate defense. Father Gil was deeply indignant, although he maintained silence. A priest should not only allow himself to be robbed, but murdered rather than to stain his hands with blood. Our Lord inculcated this, when Saint Peter cut off the ear of the soldier who had come to take him. Obdulia conjectured accurately the sentiments which agitated him, and advised him to leave the rectory and establish himself in another house.

“You can no longer live here after what has passed, father. The shock which you have undergone has been very great, and the impression must be renewed every day, at the sight of the place.”

This was not precisely what she meant to say, but that a really Christian and virtuous man must suffer much through living with a person who had just inflicted a violent death upon a fellow-creature. But if she did not say it in words, the graveness and sadness of her demeanor allowed it to be divined. For a long time Father Gil had desired precisely this. The company of the rector was annoying to him, as we already know. Now, since the assassination (that was the way his conscience described it), it had become unendurable to him. D. Miguel had



incurred the censure of the Church, his license to hold confession and to say mass was revoked: a considerable time must elapse before he could be rehabilitated. Taking advantage of these moments of weakness in the terrible priest, with the aid of his godmother, he hired a tiny house not very far from the church, and removed to it. An old servant woman of Da. Eloisa's came to wait on him and serve as his housekeeper.

Being freed from her fear of the rector, Obdulia now began to frequent the vicar's new house, and to exercise a high degree of vigilance in it. She made a thorough inspection of his underlinen, of the state of his cassocks, of the food which most pleased the father, of the details of his bed. Sometimes she came to help in the ironing, or carried off to her own house, to iron, some of the more delicate articles, such as the albs, and rochets; she darned the torn socks and took out the sleeves of the cassocks, etc. These were the ordinary tasks. But she also busied herself with finer bits of work, in embroidering for him an amice, or corporals, or some other article of sacerdotal vestment. Doña Josefa, the housekeeper, did not accept this protectorate with a good grace; but as she had not yet struck deep roots in the house, and as she observed the close friendship of this young lady for her master, she did not dare to protest. She contented herself with grumbling at her when she went to visit her former mistress, and calling her a meddler and a fool. The longer it continued, with the more ill-will did she resist, and she ended by speaking her mind, as we



shall have occasion to see. Neither was Father Gil tranquil nor content in this atmosphere of delicate attentions, affection, and veneration in which the young woman had enveloped him. Despite the fact that he professed a lively admiration for her, and appreciated her advice, he experienced a vague sense of discomfort every time that he beheld her occupied with the care of his person. It seemed to him that this was lowering the spiritual character of that friendship, formed and maintained for the purpose of improving their souls, of aiding each other in the path of perfection. He found no mention of Santa Teresa having darned the socks of San Juan de la Cruz. Moreover, he could not well reconcile that disdain for the flesh which she practiced so well on herself, with the comforts with which she insisted on surrounding him. Why should she be so severe toward herself, and so mild toward him? Could she, by any chance, suppose that he was so weak and cowardly that he could not live without such cares?

Father Gil pondered this subject, as he leaned on the railing of a grated corridor which opened from his house toward the sea. The sun was setting amid crimson clouds, flooding the town and the harbor with a wave of warm, reddish light. The curtain of rocks which closes it in on the opposite shore, raised its enormous mass above the waters, casting a vast expanse of shadow. And amid that blackness, the eyes of the priest caught a flash of the waves, which displayed and concealed their white crests at brief intervals. The pier was deserted: the hour for the return of the launches was not yet



come. The tenders and smacks pitched gently, impatient at their inaction. A sea-gull hovered in concentric circles, brushing the surface of the water with its wings. The far-off, gentle sound of the waves filled the slumbering air with a low murmur. The little harbor alone lived in the mobile play of the light which bathed it in a blood-red glow, and which gradually withdrew behind the cliffs.

He was so absorbed that Da. Josefa was obliged to call three times from the door before he turned round.

“What is it?”

“There is a lady downstairs who has asked for you. She says she must speak with you at once.”

“A lady?” replied Father Gil, opening his eyes very wide. “Is it not Señorita Obdulia?”

“No, señor, ’tis not she,” replied the housekeeper, with a disdainful movement of her lips. “The lady who is waiting down stairs is much prettier and more elegant.”

“Do you not know her?” he asked, somewhat abashed by the meaning which he noted in her words.

“No, señor, she is a stranger in town.”

“Then show her upstairs.”

A few seconds later a pretty young woman, about eight-and-twenty years of age, made her appearance, a blonde, with very white skin, and delicate features, dressed with wonderful elegance. In all his life Father Gil had never beheld, not even in Lancia, so distinguished a lady. Her attire was simple, a traveling gown, but it was so original, and



the cut was so elegant in all its details, that the lofty rank of the wearer was immediately visible. Her person exhaled an agreeable perfume, which attacked the nostrils as soon as she set foot in the room. He looked at her with surprise, which was speedily converted into stupefaction when he beheld the lady advance with decision toward him, and, without uttering a word, drop on her knees at his feet, and break out sobbing.

“Señora! for Heaven’s sake—rise!” he said in perturbation.

The lady did not move.

“Señora, rise,” he repeated, seizing her gently by the arm.

The stranger rose in silence, dropped into a chair, pushed up the veil on the hat which concealed her eyes, and wiped them with her handkerchief. Father Gil remained standing before her, and waited for her to explain herself. And, as she gave no signs of doing so, but concealed her face more and more, he ventured to say:

“Señora, I should be glad to know in what way I can be of service to you.”

She still waited several minutes before replying. Finally she said, without removing the handkerchief from her eyes:

“I am the wife of D. Álvaro Montesinos.”

The vicar involuntarily retreated a step.

What? that lady was the wretched woman who had been the cause of the misfortunes of D. Álvaro, of whom his godmother, Da. Eloisa, always spoke with horror? For he knew the sad history of that



marriage. The heir of the house of the Montesinos had fallen madly in love with a young girl of good family, but without money; one of those girls who are to be seen in Madrid in all the theaters, and balls, in search of a rich husband. Although he was a Montesinos, Joaquinita Domínguez (that was her name) had kept him in suspense for a while, probably in the hope that some other man would come along with an equal amount of money and a better figure; for that of the grandee of Peñascosa was certainly the most infirm and wretched that could be found. But as the other man did not make his appearance, she made up her mind one day to fall desperately in love with him, and to show it in a way that should leave no room for doubt. "All elegant Madrid" will remember the pretty blonde who had a box on the first circle of the Royal Theater, who passed the evening chatting with a lean and pallid gentleman seated in the row behind; who, in the Comedy and Apollo theaters, never removed her opera glasses from his place in the parterre; who towed him after her on the promenade of the Retiro, and even in the morning, when she went shopping, was always seen with him, escorted by her mamma. Fully convinced of her love, the nobleman asked her in marriage, and obtained her not without difficulty, since it cost the mamma many tears to entrust to him that jewel, who was the joy of her house. During the first four months, D. Álvaro spent his income for the whole year. Joaquinita must have her carriage and her box at the theaters, and she gave receptions and balls. But



she was so beautiful, and her husband found her so merry, that with the frantic love which he felt for her, he would not have refused her his heart's blood, if she had asked him for it some day, after a long, oppressive, spasmodic kiss of love, such as she bestowed upon him when she wished to beg him for a rivière of diamonds, or a double-spring carriage.

At the expiration of precisely six months, the young wife took it into her head to travel through Spain—a long journey which was to last a year or more; to visit all France, Italy, then proceed to England, pass on to Germany, and run on even as far as St. Petersburg. The enamored Montesinos interposed no obstacles to this desire, although he should have done so. A considerable capital was required to realize it, in view of the comfort and ostentation with which Joaquina insisted upon traveling. He borrowed 30,000 reales on some of his landed property, and then left Madrid. In Hendaya they saw in the railway hotel, drinking his chocolate, Federico Torres, a Madrid man, the son of the Minister of Finance. Joaquina had always found him very antipathetic, without knowing why.

"Where is that dwarf going?" she asked in a low tone, after replying coldly to his bow.

Montesinos shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

"What a quarrel you seem to have with that fellow! He strikes me as nice and agreeable!"

"What a horror!" she exclaimed with a laugh.

At Pau, they saw him once more at the station, and then they did not see him again. The married pair



had planned to remain four or five days at Marseilles; but on the third day, when D. Álvaro returned from the station, whither he had gone to arrange about the sleeping car for the following day, he was greatly surprised not to find his wife in the house. His surprise was converted into a horrible stupor, when he observed the state of disorder of their apartment. His wife's huge trunk had disappeared. Various pieces of clothing lay on the floor. The servants told him that his wife had had the trunk taken away after his departure, in order that it might be copied in a smaller size, as she had said. Then she had gone out, and had not returned. Montesinos, overwhelmed, horrified at the idea that flashed through his brain, with convulsed hand opened the secret drawer of the coffer in which he kept his money. Not a centime remained there. Comprehending at once the full extent of his misfortune, he fell to the floor as though struck by lightning. For days he lay between life and death. When he recovered consciousness, he caused a telegram to be dispatched to his brother-in-law, D. Martín, who presented himself immediately, and took him to Peñascosa. They speedily learned that Joaquinita had run away with Federico Torres, and that they were traveling merrily through Europe with the nobleman's money.

This was the woman whom Father Gil had before him. After his first movement of repulsion, he recovered himself and said :

“Calm yourself a little, señora, and tell me how I can serve you.”



"I have just arrived from Madrid," the lady articulated with difficulty, "and I went to the house of my husband, with whom I have been on bad terms for some time. I desire to become reconciled with him; that this separation, which is so ugly and so scandalous, should come to an end. An old servant whom he has—a brute!—would not permit me to see him, seized me by the arm, flung me out of the house roughly; yes, with blows!"

Here the lady broke out sobbing once more, and covered her face again with her handkerchief.

The priest waited for her to continue; but seeing that she did not, he took up the word again.

"I greatly regret this occurrence, señora; but I do not think you have any reason to be so afflicted. The offenses which are pardoned are not felt. Forgive this poor servant who acted without knowing what he was doing, and tell me what I can do to help you."

The faithless wife dried her eyes. They grew wet again, and again she dried them.

"According to what they tell me here in the town, you are the only person who visits my husband. I entreat you, by all that is holy, since you are his friend, to intercede, that our separation may cease. I have desired it eagerly for a long time. I confess that I was not good to him."

"Yes, yes, I know all," interrupted the priest impatiently.

The lady turned very red.

"I confess that I have given him grave offense.



It was a moment of blindness—a temptation of the devil. But I have always loved him and I love him still. I do not object to humiliating myself, to begging his pardon on my knees. You see, father, if I were not willing to humiliate myself—— The idea of not obtaining his pardon, of dying far away from him, accursed, horrifies me. Ah! what a frightful future! If I have sinned much, believe me, I have suffered much of late.”

“Señora, you can easily understand that it would be a great satisfaction to me to unite a parted married couple—you the same as any others. My mission is to preach concord among men, and to die for it if necessary. Even without being requested, it is my duty, my charge, to bring about in this parish the reconciliation of unhappy husbands and wives. But this is a delicate case. Apart from the very grave offense which you have inflicted on your husband, from the scandal with which it was accompanied, of those scandals which have followed it, all which combine to render reconciliation extraordinarily difficult; apart from this, I repeat, there is another and a greater difficulty. And that is, that your husband stands outside the pale of the Catholic Church. I have no other influence over him than that which a superficial acquaintance gives. None of the arguments, to which I could appeal as a priest, possess any power over his mind. On the contrary, given his ideas, it is possible that they would serve only to enrage him the more, or furnish him with occasion for ridicule.”

“Yes, yes,” interrupted the lady with a shrill,



malevolent voice, "my husband has always been a godless man; a scandalous atheist."

"Señora, belief serves but little purpose if a man behaves as though he did not believe," replied the vicar severely, for he was wounded by the aggressive tone of the lady, so contrary to her former humility.

She colored up, and dropped her eyes, again affecting deep contrition. Father Gil continued:

"On every ground, as a Christian and as a priest, I am ready to do all that lies within my power to effect what you desire. I have great doubt as to the result of my intervention. I know, also, that I am exposing myself to the danger of being flung out of the house like yourself; but I care not for that. I will do my duty, and if we meet with no success, I shall, at least, have the satisfaction of having done it."

He reflected for a few minutes, while the lady kept her intense and anxious gaze fixed upon him. Then, as though he were speaking more to himself than to her, he continued:

"There are some objections to my presenting myself at D. Álvaro's house now. The townsfolk are curious. There would be gossip—after the scandal. I think that we should wait awhile until night has fully fallen, or better still, that I should go on in advance and sound him on the subject."

"No, no!" exclaimed the lady. "You would not prevail. He would refuse to receive me. He must be taken unawares; we must take advantage of the first impulse of his heart, which is generous. Afterward when he reflects, he becomes bad scoffing."



"As you like. Then we will wait."

But the moment he had uttered these words, he was impressed with the inconvenience of remaining so long alone with a woman, and he said, with a little perturbation:

"You will permit me to leave you alone for a few moments in the meanwhile. I will come to you later."

Instead of returning to her, he sent his house-keeper to keep her company. Only when the daylight had completely died away did he go upstairs once more, hat in hand, prepared to leave the house. D. Álvaro's wife rose from her seat as soon as she saw him in this attire.

Night had already fallen. The seafaring people had retired to their houses or to the wine shops. Very few pedestrians were abroad in the long street of the Quadrant. The vicar and Montesinos' wife walked along for a time in silence, in the direction of the Field of Discouragements. As they drew near it both felt agitated, fearful. They halted a moment, as much for the purpose of calming themselves as to prepare themselves, and entering the arch of a doorway they whispered together with animation. Father Gil insisted on his idea that he should enter the house first and probe D. Álvaro's mind; he feared a scandal. The lady opposed this warmly, positively convinced that her husband would absolutely refuse to receive her, and that he would take precautions that she would not set foot across the threshold of his house. Just when they were most deeply engrossed in their discussion,



from the arch of another doorway near at hand, a dark, tall, slender shadow emerged and approached them rapidly.

“Good-evening, father; good-evening.”

It was Osuna's daughter. In the inflection of her voice, as she uttered these words, there was a certain irony, mingled with wrath, which surprised both the lady and the priest. The latter raised his head and replied coldly :

“Good-evening, daughter.”

“Are you going to the Angelus, or are you coming away?” she inquired, with the same affected tone of voice.

“I am neither going to nor coming from the Angelus, my daughter. At this moment I am occupied with matters pertaining to my ministry,” replied Father Gil in a severe tone.

But this tone, instead of soothing or intimidating the young woman, appeared to ruffle her.

“You are always doing something for God, father, he ! he ! in the church as well as at the bedside of the dying—and in the recesses of doorways, he ! he ! If you die before me, you have a witness to some of your miracles, so that they can canonize you. Go on, I do not wish to interfere with the miracle. Farewell, until we meet. He ! he !”

And when she had taken two or three steps, she said, without turning round :

“And much good may it do you !”

Montesinos' wife raised her head and fixed upon Father Gil a look of amazement and curiosity.



“Who is that?”

The priest, crimson with shame and indignation, shrugged his shoulders in token of ignorance, and they set out once more for the great mansion of Montesinos.



## VI.

WHEN they pulled the rusty bell-cord, the same lugubrious jangle which had so oppressed Father Gil on the first occasion that he had set foot in this house, produced upon both of them a quiver of fear and anxiety. Ramiro's broken voice speedily made itself heard.

"Who is it?"

"Peaceable people—friends."

"Who is it?" the question was repeated.

"It is I, Ramiro. Open," replied the priest.

The door swung slowly on its hinges, and the silhouette of the old man appeared, faintly illuminated by the light of the tiny lamp which burned above the lintel.

"Come in, Señor Vicar," he said, without perceiving the lady, who had hidden herself behind the priest. But catching sight of her at last he retreated a pace, and extending his arms in the attitude of impeding her passage, he exclaimed:

"Ah! You come back with company? This won't do. You shall not enter; that you shall not!"

"Come, Ramiro," said the priest, gently laying his hand on his shoulder, "let us pass; this is a delicate subject and does not concern you."

"You may pass if you like, but this woman may not."



“Why cannot she enter?” asked the priest, haughtily, throwing back his head.

“Because dishonest women and thieves cannot enter here.”

In the presence of this barbarous insult the lady hid her face in her hands, and a moan escaped her. Father Gil flushed, and seizing the old man by the arm, he shook him violently.

“Be civil, and if you do not respect the garb which I wear, observe the courtesies which are due to ladies. Before God and men, this is the legitimate wife of your master. Leave the passage free; all that you have to do in this matter is to hear, see, and hold your tongue.”

And giving the old man a push, he turned round, saying:

“Come, señora.”

But Ramiro, agitated, convulsed, as though he were seized with a fainting fit and were ready to fall, ran on in front of them shouting:

“Álvaro! Álvaro! That female is entering thy house!”

Two servants made their appearance on the staircase, and gazed at the scene in amazement. The old man did not halt on the principal floor; he ran on to the second, giving vent to the same cries. Father Gil, who followed him with Joaquina, said to the latter, as they reached the first story:

“Remain here for the present. I will go upstairs alone.”

When he reached the second story he ran against D. Álvaro, who was just coming out of his



room. His face, always pale, was now of a hue which inspired terror. In four words Ramiro had acquainted him with what had taken place. In the afternoon, when the unfaithful wife had come for the first time, he had not told him. D. Álvaro uttered not a word. He grasped one of the priest's arms convulsively and dragged him into his study. Then he shut the door carefully.

"Why is this woman come?" he inquired, making futile efforts to appear calm. His voice came weak and hoarse from his throat.

"She is come to implore your pardon."

"You are mistaken; she is come for money," he replied with a forced smile.

Father Gil remained silent for a moment, then said:

"I dare not make you any assurances. She appears to be repentant. Her tone is sincere; she has wept with genuine grief in my presence."

A flash of wrath darted from the eyes of the nobleman. In the throng of emotions which agitated his spirit, indignation gained the upper hand over the rest, and he said in a tone of disdain:

"I am perfectly convinced that she comes for nothing but money, but in any case I don't care a rush for her repentance or her sincerity. If she is repentant, let her ask absolution of a priest. To cherish, for an instant, the thought that I can pardon her is a fresh insult; it is an idea that could be contained only in a soul as miserable as hers."

"Pardon never degrades; it is the virtue which most ennobles a human being," remarked the priest



in surprise. D. Álvaro darted upon him a glance of rage; then he shrugged his shoulders with scorn and said :

“It is well; let us leave this subject. The important point is that, as you have brought this lady hither, you should immediately take her away again.”

“I shall venture to entreat you that, although you do not pardon her, you will, at least, permit her to speak with you. Perhaps she has some revelations to make.”

“I am not curious: she may keep her revelations, or confide them to anyone whom she pleases. For my part, heed well what I am about to say to you,” and he seized his wrist with convulsive fingers, “for my part, neither now nor ever will I exchange a word with her. You may tell her so.”

Father Gil dropped his head and remained silent, while the nobleman began to pace in agitation up and down the room with his hands thrust in his pockets. From time to time a sarcastic smile rose to his face, and a slightly stertorous breathing escaped through his nostrils, bearing witness to the tension of his mind, as the gauge reveals the tension in the steam boiler.

“This cannot be,” said the priest gently, after a while, “you will understand, D. Álvaro, that this lady cannot go outside this house to sleep without giving pabulum to evil tongues, without calling up again gossip which should not be repeated. Out of egotism, if not out of charity, you must consent to allow your wife to sleep in this house



to-night, for I do not think that it would suit you to scandalize the town."

D. Álvaro continued his agitated pacing to and fro, without uttering a word in reply, as though he had not heard the priest's proposition. After a while he planted himself in front of him, and, gazing fixedly at him, he said :

"It is well. Tell her that, if she likes, there is no objection to her sleeping in this house ; although she must have very little dignity to accept it," he added, lowering his voice and emphasizing each syllable. "And if she wants money for her return journey, Osuna will provide her with it."

"I thank you for this condescension, but I go away in great sadness," replied Father Gil with a smile. "Any sacrifice will help to blot out of your memory the offense endured, and to solder the chain of your marriage afresh. What would I not give at this moment to be an eloquent man !"

"Eloquence, sir vicar, has served in the commission of a thousand infamous deeds in this world, but I do not believe that there could be any greater than the one which you propose to me."

"For you, it is a contemptible deed, but for me it would be a noble and generous act, fit for an imitator of Christ. We do not understand each other in that which concerns dignity and indignity."

"I am sorry for you, father," replied the nobleman, offering his hand.

"And I am sorry for you, D. Álvaro. Good-night."

When the latter was left alone he continued to



pace to and fro for several minutes longer ; then he halted before the bell-cord and pulled it violently. Ramiro speedily made his appearance.

"That woman is here ; do you wish me to turn her out ?" asked the old man, without waiting for his master's orders.

"No ; show her to the drawing room, light all the lamps, and tell Dolores to come upstairs."

The servant remained motionless, gazing at him in surprise.

"And are you going to consent to that ?"

"Silence !" exclaimed the nobleman with energy, laying his finger on his lips. "Do what I command you immediately."

The old man withdrew, grumbling. The maid presented herself at once.

"Dolores, tell the cook to prepare supper for the lady who is downstairs, and to do her best. Light up the dining room, get out the fine table service, arrange the blue cabinet, and take the best linen from the press to put on the bed ; let absolutely nothing be lacking. Help her undress ; anything that she may order, do immediately. You understand ?"

"Yes, sir ; be at ease ; she will be treated as she deserves."

D. Álvaro cast an oblique glance at the maid, and hastened to say, rather curtly :

"Dispatch your business quickly and show her the blue room. If she desires to sleep elsewhere, show her what you call the Bishop's room."

Again he was left alone, and again he resumed



his nervous walk from corner to corner of the room. In spite of all the fortitude and the calm which he had displayed in repulsing Father Gil's supplications, his brain was working in an agitated, feverish manner. This wholly unexpected visit renewed the happy and melancholy memories which were treasured up in the depths of his being, and which no longer troubled him. His matrimonial life, which had been fading out of his memory for the space of three years, like a dream which vanishes in the light of dawn, promptly rose up before his eyes, so close that he could touch it with his hand. Not a detail was lacking in the picture. And, in the presence of this picture, he felt himself perturbed, as though the events had but just taken place.

After pacing to and fro several minutes, with long strides, he began to halt frequently, lending an ear to the noises which reached him from the first story. He divined, rather than perceived, the preparations which the servants were engaged in making in honor of that vile woman, who had revealed to him the full blackness and the full misery of existence. "Now they are lowering the lamp in the dining room—now they are taking out the table service—they must be making the bed—the people have withdrawn—someone has left the house; it must be Rufino, who has gone to the shop for something—there seems to be talking in the blue room."

He no longer walked about; with his ear glued to the keyhole, he listened eagerly to the sounds



which reached him from below. And, as they arrived too confusedly, he ended by opening the door, advancing his head cautiously as far as the balustrade of the staircase, and listening from that point, motionless, with bated breath. He had imagined, in a vague sort of way, that his wife, once free and alone, would come up to his room to talk to him. He would have liked this, for the sake of giving himself the pleasure of casting her off with some disdainful phrases which would penetrate to the bottom of her soul. There was an instant when he thought that this desire was about to be realized. He heard footsteps on the stairs; all his blood flowed back to his heart.

He made haste to quit the baluster and return to his own room. It was Dolores, who had come up to ask him for a key. When she went away, he returned to his spying; he remained a long time on the staircase, without knowing why he did so. He heard the confused sound of his wife and Dolores chatting together. The maid was talkative; Joaquina also had an expansive temperament; the conversation grew more and more animated. He even fancied that he caught some merry laughs on the part of his wife, which surprised him more than they angered him. At length he noticed that she had sat down to supper. Dolores went and came with dishes. The supper came to an end. The maid halted in the dining room and continued her gossip. Weary with standing, he seated himself on one of the steps of the staircase. As he did so, he felt ashamed, and he began to call himself vaguely



to account for the emotions which held his spirit in suspense. He waited for one long hour, in this manner, hearing the confused sound of voices, in which he could distinguish nothing, not even which belonged to his wife and which to the servant. At last he observed that they had left the dining room. He still imagined that his wife would profit by the opportunity to come upstairs to visit him. He rose hastily to his feet, and prepared to rush into his room as soon as he should hear steps on the stairs. But he waited in vain. The lady betook herself to the blue chamber, accompanied by Dolores. He heard the door close behind them; then he noticed that it opened again, and that the maid came out and went away to her own room. No doubt, she had helped the lady to undress, and had left her in bed.

With his head between his hands, and his elbows resting on his knees, he remained motionless, abstracted, listening now to the voice of his thought alone and to the beating of his heart. He was devoured by a lively vexation, which he did not wish to account for to himself. He felt the necessity of coming face to face with his wife, of insulting her, of spitting on her, of striking her. Why had he refused to receive her a little while ago, and why did he now long to have her before him in this manner? He believed that it was because his hatred and his indignation had increased. He did not know how long he remained in that posture. The desire to come face to face with his wife burned more vividly every moment in his breast,



rendered him uneasy, excited ; it was gradually turning to a fever, to an intense rage, which devoured him. Oh, if he could only hold her in his hands, and crush her until she screamed with pain ; if he could only make her suffer in body what he had suffered in soul ! Red-hot points of iron seared his shoulders, his hands trembled as though they longed to strangle in order to calm his anguish ; an intolerable heat surged up from his feet to his brain. The shadows grew thicker and enveloped him in a warm, stifling atmosphere, as though he had been in an underground cave. There came a moment when he thought that he could not move ; his swollen limbs refused to obey his will. He made an effort, as though to break a net which held him down, and rose to his feet. He betook himself to his room, with vacillating steps. The light of the lamp which burned on the table dazzled him so that he was on the point of falling from his confused vision. He extinguished it with a breath, groped for the window, and threw it wide open. A strong gust of wind struck him in the face, and made its way with a roar into the room, where it set the papers on the table a-flying. D. Álvaro inhaled with delight the cold, damp air, thrust himself out of the window, and exposed his burning brow to the inclemency of the gale. The thousand needles of rain pricked his cheeks and, converted into tears, bathed them completely. For a few minutes he enjoyed this cold with a sense of luxury, longing to have it penetrate his brain and calm its tumultuous activity. The night was not dark. In



spite of a heavy canopy of clouds, the light of the moon contrived to break through, and scattered a faint, melancholy light. Only when some great cloud, more dense, and blacker than usual, passed in front of it, discharging its burden of water, was the light almost completely extinguished. The waves dashed against the cliffs which served as a bulwark to the Field of Discouragements. The wind whistled among the crevices of the church tower. The lugubrious music of the enraged elements calmed the nobleman's fever a little.

Consoled by this freshness, he breathed freely; he thought that he was master of himself once more. Nevertheless, at the expiration of a few moments, the same acute, burning desire, returned to oppress his brain. Oh, if he could but have that infamous woman before him, that he might spew out in her face the insults which his pain and his indignation had accumulated during three years; then he would instantly seize her by the neck, so, and wring it! That instant of pleasure would repay him for the torments which he had gone through—one minute which was worth a whole existence of pain. And why not enjoy it? Was not the murderer of his happiness in his power? Was not she there below, sleeping tranquilly, while he was still writhing in cruel tortures? He retreated a little way from the window, and dried his face with his handkerchief. He felt that he was powerless to fight with this craving for vengeance. All his philosophy, unconsoling, indifferent, had foundered. The world had ceased to be a pure ap-



pearance; it was converted into an undeniable reality; life had acquired the absolute value which it has for every finite being. He was forced, in despite of reason, to satisfy the animal instincts which howl in the depths of our being. In vain, with the object of calming himself, did he tell himself that all those emotions were of no value or significance in the eternal course of things; that, within a short time, all would be smoke; in vain did he represent to himself the imbecility of the human being, struggling and suffering as the holocaust of a force which mocked at him. All his thoughts dashed against a mighty, irrational desire which dominated him. The brute, as is always the case, was more powerful than the philosopher.

He groped for the door, and, clinging to the walls, he reached the staircase. As he descended the first step, his boots resounded in the silence of the house. He sat down, and took them off. Then he slipped downstairs, without making the slightest noise. He advanced without stumbling, thanks to his perfect familiarity with the house, along the corridors until he reached the door of the blue chamber. At that moment, the great clock in the dining room struck. He did not know to what hour this half-hour stroke belonged. He placed his ear at the keyhole, and remained there for a while listening, without perceiving any sound. Without doubt, Joaquina was already asleep. Then he slipped to the small door which opened from the alcove on a narrow passage, and listened again. After a moment he could hear an even, serene breathing.



A quick shiver ran through his whole body when he perceived it. He felt a lump in his throat, but it was a lump of fire; his heart seemed ready to leap from his breast; he laid his hands upon it to stop its palpitations. The traitress was sleeping tranquilly, without heeding him! So that desire for reconciliation was a farce? She had come solely in search of money? What a wretch! What an odious woman!

Employing all imaginable precautions, he grasped the bolt and gave it a push. The door of communication was fastened on the inside. Then he went to the door of the cabinet. This was open. He advanced through the room on the tips of his toes, holding his breath, reached the alcove, and lifted the curtains. He took another step, and came in contact with the bed: he laid his hands on it, and slid it along towards the head. He felt the pressure of his wife's body as it heaved with her respiration. He approached his face to the spot where the lady's head should be, and said, very softly:

"Joaquina, Joaquina."

She did not wake.

"Joaquina, Joaquina," he repeated.

Still she made no movement.

Then he shook her lightly by the shoulder, calling her again by her name.

The lady uttered a cry and awoke in a fright.

"Who is it? Who is here?"

"Do not be alarmed, it is I," said the nobleman, in a faint voice.



"Who? Who?" replied the lady, with signs of terror in her voice, throwing herself against the wall.

"It is I, Álvaro. See here," he added in a trembling voice—"I know that you have come to make friends. You have done well. Let us forget all; let us commence a new life."

The lady made no reply. Crouching against the wall, her respiration, still panting with fear, could be heard.

"I have made superhuman efforts to forget you," he continued, in the same trembling voice, deadened by emotion, "but they have been useless. You are fixed in my breast with iron and fire. You have been my first, my only love in this world. You have done me much harm, very much! but if you were to do me a thousand times as much, I would love you still; yes, I love you, I adore you! Though they may call me a coward, and unworthy, I will repeat it in the face of the whole world. If you did but know how I have suffered! It was not my ruined dignity and my pride which made me suffer. It was my heart which suffered. What an affliction! What profound sadness! It seemed as though an icy hand were gently tearing out my vitals. But I overlook everything. I do overlook it all, do I not? Let us begin to love each other anew, as on that night when I clasped you in my arms for the first time, in an alley of trees in the gardens of Aranjuez."

The same silence on the part of Joaquina.

"Answer me. Have I frightened you, my darling?"



Forgive me. Why did you not come upstairs at once, as soon as that priest was gone? Did you think that I would cast you out? No, my precious one, no. I love you; I adore you!"

At the same time, stretching out his hands, he hit upon one of his wife's hands, and raised it to his lips with enthusiasm. The lady hastily drew it away.

D. Álvaro was surprised.

"Why do you draw your hand away? Am not I offering mine, and am not I the offended party? Are not you come to be reconciled with me?"

"Yes, yes, Álvaro," she murmured. "I am come for that purpose. You have frightened me."

"Forgive me, Joaquina. If you only knew what joy it gives me to hear your voice! I thought that I should never, never hear it again! Will you be my wife?"

"No, Álvaro," the faithless wife murmured once more. "To-morrow. Leave me; I am very tired. Leave me until to-morrow."

"I will not molest you. You shall sleep in tranquility."



## VII.

AFTER venting her wrath, Osuna's daughter pursued her way down the street of the Quadrant, still laughing nervously for a while. But this laugh finally died away. She felt a strange restlessness, a certain low-spiritedness which made her limbs bend beneath her. She halted for a moment; she was seized with a desire to return and spy again upon the pair whom she had left yonder on the Field of Discouragements. The fear of being observed restrained her. She was also conscious, though vaguely, of the singularity and censurable character of her conduct. Why had she done that? Who was she, to spy upon the steps of her confessor, not to speak of blaming him? Her vexation was so great, nevertheless, that it did not allow of her repenting. Her mouth was parched; her cheeks burned. She walked on hastily, and directed her course to the pier. It was already deserted. The sea breeze refreshed her a little. But she still felt so agitated that she did not wish to return home; she felt the need of gossiping, of distracting her thoughts. She would go to Da. Eloisa's and sup there, as on other occasions.

The husband and wife were on the point of sitting down to table when she arrived. They were accompanied by Father Norberto, which signified that there was to be tripe.



"How breathless you are, my child! exclaimed Da. Eloisa.

"Don't you know? I come only from Da. Trinidad's. I am going to take supper with you. Do me the favor to send a message to papa."

She tried to appear serene and smiling.

"So you are alone, eh? Alone at eight o'clock in the evening," said D. Martín, in a jesting tone of reproof.

"Ah, if you only knew how agitated I am! There are so few people in the streets. At one moment I found myself alone, and I set out to run until I found some women."

"What! Are you afraid that they would take you for one of those whom Father Norberto here hunts with a lasso," began D. Martín again, with the Attic humor of the camp.

The young woman blushed to her very ears. Da. Eloisa darted a severe look at her husband.

"Come, don't begin your barbarous talk, Martín."

"Lord, I'm only suggesting the possibility of a mistake!" replied the veteran, with a laugh. "And otherwise, I appeal to Father Norberto to say whether there is much difference in face between a young lady and his little friends."

"They are not my friends, D. Martín," replied the good priest, laughing benevolently; "they are wandering sheep."

"But you throw stones at them to make them return to the fold, without kisses."

"Oh! Oh! D. Martín!"



Good Father Norberto, chaplain and organist of the parish, too modest to aspire to rendering faith and virtue triumphant among the upper classes, had dedicated himself with enthusiasm for some time past to wresting from vice those poor women who fall, for the most part, through misery. He made his way into the loathsome dwellings which they occupied, catechized them, employing gigantic efforts of oratory which made him as red as a tomato, and obliged him to cough in an imposing manner. And when the art of Bossuet produced no effect, he appealed to money. It was a pious sort of bribery, in which he had expended the small property which he had inherited from his parents, and which also ran away with the greater part of his salary. He had brought about the repentance of various sinners, whom he was accustomed to remove to a certain asylum or convent, established for their benefit, in Valladolid, himself defraying, of course, the cost of the journey, their installation, etcetera. But in return for these triumphs the good chaplain suffered terrible disappointments. On many occasions the fair sinners made a show of repentance, bled him of all the quartos which they could, and wound up by jeering at him and narrating the jest through the whole town. But he was not discouraged in his work. He was proof against laughter and calamities. Some who had begun by deceiving him had ended in sincere repentance. D. Norberto's dream was to found in Peñascosa a convent for repentant Magdalens. In order to bring this about he was capable of begging alms through all the province, of working himself,



as a day laborer on the building, of even renouncing tripe for the rest of his life.

Everyone in the town knew about his mania. There was no one who did not believe that he had a right to launch his jest at it, of a more or less heavy character, according to the education of the individual. But, however many there might be of these, he was never seen to become vexed, or even to show signs of impatience. He laughed amiably, and retreated, stopping up his ears. Neither did anyone doubt, though some affected to do so, his upright intentions and the complete disinterestedness with which he labored. The very wretched women who deceived him dared not calumniate him, and if any one of them had done so, she would have been given the lie categorically and promptly by her companions.

"Martín, I entreat you, for Heaven's sake, that you will not talk nonsense!" exclaimed Da. Eloisa, anxiously.

"Wife, we are talking of mystic kisses."

"Yes, Da. Eloisa," D. Norberto made haste to say; "your husband intends to allude to the gentle means which must be employed in order to convince these unfortunate women."

D. Martín comprehended that he had gone too far, and he assented, though not without directing an expressive wink at the chaplain.

They sat down at table. Obdulia made frantic efforts to eat, but her stomach refused all food. She continued in a very visible state of agitation. D. Martín jested with her on her lack of appetite.



Could she, by chance, be in love? In spite of her inclination for the Church, he wagered that she would wind up by a violent attachment. He could pick out the temperaments destined to love with a single glance. There were certain signs: the circle under the eyes, which she possessed in a marked degree, eyes somewhat turned, parched lips. The chief of the veterans had set off once more. Da. Eloisa was on needles, and again called him to order in a voice of anguish. This happened very often. D. Martín enjoyed indescribably making the women's cheeks flush with his daring remarks. It seemed to be the proper complement to that other tendency of his, to make the cheeks of the men flush with his proverbial blows. Both inclinations revealed his heroic temperament, and supplied incontrovertible testimony to his derivation from the cavalry branch of the service. Obdulia alone was able to reply to him with appositeness and grace, leaving him, not infrequently, utterly abashed; but the pre-occupation which now weighed upon her prevented her taking due note of his words and answering them as they deserved. Before the end of the supper she felt ill, and was obliged to withdraw into another room. Later on, Da. Serafina Barrados arrived with her chaplain and steward. Both were rosy, smiling, and unusually loquacious. Their eyes flashed with merry and malicious fire, which attracted the attention of their friends.

"Here's a cigar, D. Martín," said the young priest, offering him one of a well known make, the mate to the one which he was sucking at luxuriously.



"Good tobacco!" exclaimed the master of the house, turning it between his fingers. "What castigations you inflict upon yourself, my friend."

"The regular style," replied the priest with a smile of satisfaction, at the same time darting an expressive glance at his former mistress, who returned it with a brilliant and affectionate look.

"Where do you buy them?"

"I don't buy them; they are given to me."

Another exchange of smiling and passionate looks.

"Ah! then! you get them for a song. May one inquire who the very generous gentleman is?"

"It is not a gentleman; it is a lady."

Another glance.

"Ah, you rogue! I already was aware that you enjoyed great favor with the ladies."

Over the very cheerful face of Da. Serafina flitted a cloud, which darkened it momentarily.

"It is a present from Da. Serafina, on the occasion of my birthday, which is to-day," the priest made haste to say.

"It had already struck me that you both seemed quite too well pleased to-day! On such an auspicious occasion, there was a banquet, was there not?"

"What do you mean by a banquet?" asked D. Joaquin, with a certain uneasiness, fearing the military frankness of his friend.

"Yes, a little family dinner, with several extraordinary dishes, and a couple of bottles of Bordeaux."



"It was not Bordeaux," replied D. Joaquin, laughing, "it was Burgundy."

"Better and better."

"I believe it," exclaimed Da. Serafina, devouring her chaplain with her eyes.

And the fire of glances and winks was renewed between them, as they lavished on each other a thousand warm attentions which betokened a state of perfect felicity.

The arrival of Da. Rita disturbed them not in the least. This lady, small and plump, with large, black, expressionless eyes, and teeth equally large, sound and yellow, always entered with a basket in which she carried her work. She drew the work out deliberately, worked at it for half an hour in silence, listening attentively to all that was said, then gathered up her materials once more, and went off to repeat the same thing elsewhere. In this manner she made the round of several houses every evening. Her mania consisted in knowing everything; in knowing everything down to the most trivial and insignificant detail. She was well received everywhere, for in spite of her excessive and feverish curiosity, there had never been any unpleasantness on her account. She enjoyed the mere knowing; it was an intense, disinterested pleasure, like that of the men of science who look only to the result with which their knowledge may furnish them. As the miser heaps up golden coins in his coffer, with no thought of ever making use of them, so Da. Rita treasured up in her brain all the private information which she could collect in



her peregrinations through the town, without annoying anyone with it. Hence, very few persons refrained from discussing secrets in her presence; but if anyone did so, and she observed it, she was seized with such anxiety and pangs to discover what they were hiding from her, that she did not rest or sleep for a moment; she went about pale and heavy-eyed, and became rude and intractable. Once she had unearthed the longed-for secret, although it were the most insignificant of matters, she recovered her calm and her serenity, and became once more gentle, pacific, inoffensive. Some malicious individuals, like D. Martín, Father Narciso, D. Joaquin, and others, were in the habit of playing tricks on her by feigning a mystery among themselves, tormenting her, and driving her out of her mind through pure curiosity.

But when Father Narciso entered, D. Joaquin grew graver, concealing from his companion that ineffable bliss which titillated his soul, and avoided meeting the sparkling eyes of his former mistress. The father smelt the aromatic smoke of the cigar, directed one scrutinizing glance at his colleague, another at Da. Serafina, and grasped the subject.

"There has been a *gaudeamus*, hasn't there?" he asked in a low voice.

D. Joaquin denied it in the most bare-faced manner.

Consejero, Cándida, Da. Filomena, Father Melchor, Marcelino, and, in short, all the habitual members of the circle, made their appearance one after the other. The customary groups were soon



formed, the elements of this society parted, performing the chemical operation of elective affinities. But this operation was not effected without the violent commotions and shocks which are to be observed in the bosom of nature, without the actions and reactions to which fermentation gives rise. On this particular evening, Cándida, the bony young lady with whom we are already acquainted, instead of coming up to kiss Father Melchor's hand, seating herself at his side, and whispering all the evening, went and performed the same ceremonies with Father Norberto. Why this desertion? No one in the company knew, except the persons immediately interested and Da. Rita. Father Melchor had had the indiscretion to mention, in a certain house, that the rochets which the young townswoman made for him, were skimped in the sleeves, and that it cost him an effort to bend his arm in them. On the other hand, he had bestowed warm praise on a band which Da. Marciala had given him. The case was grave, and was bound to produce this sad result. Da. Marciala, perceiving that Father Narciso was ever more and more inclined to permit and favor the fervent admiration of Da. Filomena, exhibited her feeling and displeasure by making up to D. Melchor, and talking to him with affected affection. Da. Filomena, after a number of years spent in resigned, silent admiration, had finally attained the goal of her aspirations when she least expected it. So much affection, so much attention had finally captivated the mind of the eloquent chaplain of Sarrió, who gave the widow clear indi-



cations of his esteem. After having attempted it in vain many times, she had obtained from him by dint of entreaty, that he would take the office of preceptor to her son, and he had accepted the post with eagerness. His dominating and fiery temper manifested itself later on. The poor child was obliged to undergo, not only excessive toil, but a series of malevolent castigations, refined in their cruelty; and Da. Filomena, who was the personification of gentleness, who had never raised her hand to her son, passively consented that this man should beat him unmercifully. She silenced her conscience by telling herself that it was for his good.

Marcelina who had dreamed of supplanting Da. Serafina in the heart of D. Joaquin—and she really had some grounds for this dream, since the young priest never failed to distinguish her by his attentions from among the rest—suffered considerable disappointment. She acquired the conviction that the latter had been using her as a tool to make his mistress suffer a little, and to keep her more attentive and submissive. This conviction thrust her again in the direction of D. Narciso, whom she had abandoned some time previously; but the latter, who had never exhibited any great affection for her, as he had for Obdulia, repulsed her without the slightest consideration. Nevertheless, the ex-young lady continued to do battle bravely with Da. Filomena. A few days before, she had presented the chaplain with a coverlet in crochet work, which was a real marvel of patient and skillful toil. It is certain



that the widow, when she espied it on the priest's bed, experienced a lively sense of displeasure, and shed many tears in secret.

These spiritual agitations, these conflicts of sensibility and abnegation between the pious dames who took part in it, were precisely what gave a certain dramatic interest to this serene, innocent circle. They certainly were not the coarse rivalries which are set up in profane circles. Here everything was effected in a gentle, innocent, spiritual manner; the petty shocks which we have described seemed merely the light ripple on a beautiful and transparent lake. This assembly was like the ante-chamber of heaven, where the relations of the angels, of the male and female saints attain the highest degree of immortal purity.

That which was passing in the mind of Osuna's daughter bears out well the idea, which we have just formulated. After undergoing that gastric upheaval, the result of the agitated state in which she found herself, she fell into a state of profound physical and moral weakness. She had the impression that a great piece of treachery had been committed against her, and, although her mind informed her vaguely of the absurdity of such a sensation, she could not diminish its intensity, nor rid herself of it. She hated Father Gil, she hated him with all her heart. She would give something to revenge herself. For what? She did not say it to herself; but, in the depths of her heart she was persuaded that she had reason for it. She formed the inexorable resolution never to confess to him



again. To him? A priest who goes under doorways by night to whisper with beautiful and elegant women! Puf! It would be a shame to do it. Obdulia was very sure that the woman who was talking with her confessor was pretty. This certainly tortured her. Positively, if he had the daring to come up and address her, she would administer to him a severe rebuff, she would turn her back on him. And she would confess to D. Narciso again, and she would tell her friends in what a situation she had seen him, with an unknown and elegant lady. For there was no doubt that the woman was elegantly dressed, she had marked that well. That long cloak had never been made in Peñascosa. Who could she be? Some one from Lancia, of course, who was come to pay him a visit. And why come from afar to visit a priest, when one was not his mother, or his sister, or his relative? Did not that lady know that the reputation of a priest is a very delicate thing and that a mere trifle ruins it? The young woman's brain kept on turning these and similar ideas over and over, while her body remained motionless, dejected, and her eyes were riveted upon the hands of Da. Marciala. She felt ill, she wished to go home; but a vague hope which she could not define, retained her against her will.

In the meanwhile, Father Norberto was surprised and confused by the unwonted attentions of which Cándida made him the object. The poor man was not accustomed to have them lavished upon him. The fair sex of Peñascosa professed a certain com-



passionate disdain where he was concerned. He was regarded as a virtuous priest, but of very limited understanding. His very colleagues, when they spoke of him, did so with an unvarying smile, half patronizing, half mocking, on their lips. Father Norberto's virtue possessed no poetry for the ladies, it was lacking in that special charm which renders it contagious in other priests, it was a pedestrian piety, which was not translated into delicate and sublime conceptions, as in Father Narciso, Father Gil, and others. Thus, rare was the young woman who confessed to him, who craved his conversation, or had an inclination to envelope him in clouds of incense, as Cándida was doing at that moment. His very longing to redeem fallen women, much as it was respected, did not render him sympathetic to young ladies. To tell the truth, he got along admirably without this sympathy, and it did not prevent his growing fatter and fatter every day, and passing his life in laughter. The flattery which his new spiritual daughter was now engaged in pouring into his ear, in an insinuating voice, instead of pleasing him, disturbed and annoyed him visibly. It was one of the rare occasions on which he could be seen in a serious mood. He made his chair squeak, changed his position every instant, and cracked the joints of his hands in a formidable manner, coughed, turned red, and, from time to time, allowed a slight snort to escape from his throat, this being the manner in which his alarmed modesty protested. Finally, greatly allured by the sweet prospect of a game of ombre, he took advan-



tage of one of the damsel's pauses to rise and say, as he twisted his lips a little, by way of a bow :

"With your permission, señorita."

When he escaped from this trying situation, his fiery red countenance expanded, and the universal smile of benevolence which served as its principal ornament returned to it. His approach to the group, where stood Consejero, D. Martín, Osuna, and another military gentleman from Lancia, was hailed with delight.

"I present you," said D. Martín, to his friend from out of town, lowering his voice and casting a suspicious glance around him, to make sure that his wife could not hear him, "to Father Norberto, a priest who can inform you of all the Brands in town, if you desire to know any."

"Oh! Oh! D. Martín, for Heaven's sake!"

"Dare to assert that you do not know them!"

"Yes, my good man—I do know of some——"

"This gentleman devotes himself to young women who have gone astray," continued D. Martín, addressing his companion, who smiled in amazement.

"Heavens! Consider, D. Martín, that this gentleman does not know me——"

"It is in order that he may know you that I speak."

Da. Eloisa cast terrified glances at her husband from a distance, as she observes the confusion of D. Norberto and the laughter of the others.

"Good," continued Señor de las Casas, becoming prudent and conciliatory; "I will not say that you



have any bad ideas, D. Norberto, in going to those houses of perdition, but what I shall always maintain is, that you are rendering them a great service."

Da. Eloisa finally rose from her chair and came toward them, asking with vexation :

"Are not you going to play ombre to-night?"

"We are, we are," replied her husband, stifling the laugh which was bursting from his body as it was from the rest. Consejero, D. Norberto, and he seated themselves at the table, and were speedily lost to all mundane sounds under the fascinating influence of the ace of spades, the deuce of spades, and the ace of clubs. A little later, Consejero was gnashing his teeth, and pulling his mustache cruelly, because he had had the tray of clubs, his personal enemy, twice running. For many years he had declared a war to the death on it. Every time that it came into his hands, Consejero became convulsed, and swore under his breath like a carter. The tray of clubs, evil-intentioned and crafty beyond every other card, apparently delighted in seeing him irritated, and stole by stealth upon him whenever it could when the pack was dealt. This antipathy, was known not only in this special circle, but all over town. Some persons, with due precaution, of course, since D. Romualdo was apt to burst out violently and suddenly, jested with him on this point. On a certain occasion, when he was fishing with rod and line behind the church, he drew up on his hook a card, which proved to be the tray of clubs. He entertained no doubt whatever that it had been



thrown there intentionally, but he did not say a word about it, lest he should be laughed at.

"Do you know whom I have just seen entering your brother's house in the company of the vicar?" said D. Peregrín, in his snuffling, piercing voice, addressing the mistress of the house as he entered.

Obdulia's heart gave so vigorous a leap that she came near falling to the floor. The others, including Da. Eloisa, raised their heads with curiosity.

"Who was it?"

"Your sister-in-law, Joaquina," screamed rather than said, the ex-governor *ad interim* of Tarragona, as though he were announcing the last judgment.

"My sister-in-law!" exclaimed Da. Eloisa.

"Your own sister-in-law," affirmed D. Peregrín, with a blast of most disagreeable sound.

"It cannot be!" said Da. Eloise.

"It cannot be!" exclaimed her husband, suspending his game.

"It cannot be!" repeated Da. Serafina Barrados.

The ex-governor of Tarragona emitted from his nostrils several noisy snorts, like a locomotive which is letting off its superfluous steam, and replied:

"Do you think, ladies, that I have no eyes in my head?"

This transcendental query, accompanied by a proportionate knitting of the brows, produced considerable impression on his interrupters.

"You may easily have been mistaken," said the veteran.

"It is so easy!" exclaimed Da. Eloisa.

"I saw her as plainly as I see you, only three



paces away. I had just been speaking to the sacristan about the anniversary of my father, when, at the turning of the street of the Quadrant, I beheld Father Gil and a lady who seemed to me to be a stranger. I wished to know who she was, and I halted a little near the street lantern, hiding behind the jamb of a door. It was Joaquinita, without the slightest doubt. I waited a little and then watched them until they entered the house of Montesinos.

"But do you know her well?" asked Father Narciso.

"As well as I do you."

"Peregrín, you should remember that you made her but one visit in Madrid, and that by night, according to what you have told me," hazarded D. Juan timidly.

The ex-governor hurled at his brother a glance of ineffable disdain.

"Don't thrust in your paw, Juan."

"Peregrín, I do not know why——"

"Juan!"

"Peregrín!"

"Don't you meddle! Don't you meddle! After calling on that lady, I saw her a great many other times in the street, and bowed to her. Consequently, I find myself under the sad necessity of informing you that what you have just said is an impertinence. When I assert that I know this lady, it is because I do know her. I never talk at hazard. If I were a frivolous man, without bottom, I should not have been able to occupy the positions



which I have occupied. Let this serve to govern your words."

"Now that I think of it," remarked Cándida, "I saw a blond lady, very elegantly dressed, alight from the coach."

D. Peregrín shrugged his shoulders with a gesture of profound disdain, as much as to say, "Why do you back me up, and contradict the absurdities of this fool?"

This information and this gesture completed the annihilation of D. Juan, whose face expressed dejection. But Da. Teodora, with her great serene eyes, bent upon him so affectionate a glance that the gentleman's features, contracted with pain, gradually expanded, and a placid, melancholy smile finally flitted across his lips. On the other hand, the brow of D. Peregrín was instantaneously furrowed with wrinkles. To what purpose was the undeniable superiority which he possessed over his brother? The better he demonstrated it in the presence of the well preserved spinster, the more did she incline to favor the other. The judge of the primary court of claims in Tarragona had been right, when he said to him that woman was a tissue of contradictions.

Obdulia felt that an intense, infinite joy was entering her soul in floods. Her body, enervated, incapable of movement, suddenly acquired the lightness of a bird. She desired to quit that room instantly, and fly through the air, and sing aloud her delight. Anyone might have observed the change which had taken place in her. Her obstin-



ate muteness was followed by an excessive loquacity, an animated, substanceless chatter, interspersed with strange laughs, in which she took pleasure, since they eased the emotion which oppressed her, and relaxed the strain upon her contracted nerves. She did not know what she was saying, neither did Da. Filomena, with whom she was talking, being intent upon contemplating the intelligent countenance of Father Narciso, and enjoying the brilliancy of his humorous remarks. Soon she felt her throat parched, and an unwonted heat in her cheeks. The gentleman from Lancia, who was there, observed it, and hastened a remark to Osuna that his daughter's eyes were very black and brilliant, and that the scarlet roses, which the heat had brought to her face, were very becoming to her.

The news had produced a sensation in all minds. Very few there knew the wife of Montesinos, although no one was ignorant of the conjugal drama which had driven the heir back to Peñascosa. But that which in outsiders was pure curiosity, presented itself to the good Da. Eloisa, as was logical, under the form of a lively and deep emotion. She wished to go out immediately, and learn what was taking place in her brother's house, then she wished that her husband should go, then she wished to send a servant. D. Martín opposed everything, because, viewing matters more coolly, he understood that any step on their part, at such a moment, would be inopportune. The conversation became extremely animated, to such a degree that the ombre players stopped their game, and took part in it. The com-



ments which were made were infinite. They concocted a thousand hypotheses upon the case. Some were of the opinion that the wife had returned repentant, to beg forgiveness of her husband, others that she had made the journey thus alone for the purpose of claiming alimony from him, others, that her intention was to take preparatory steps for procuring a divorce, others that the husband had summoned her, unable to cast out from his heart the love which he felt for her (the majority of the feminine element inclined to this suppositional), others that Father Gil, on his own motion, had written to Da. Joaquinita, and had prepared the scene, in order that D. Álvaro might pardon her, others that he had persuaded the latter to summon her to Peñas-cosa. There were not lacking some even, who supposed that D. Álvaro and his wife had been in correspondence for some time past, and that it was she who had been opposed to coming to visit him, until the present occasion.

“At any rate, what is indisputable is, that Father Gil plays a very important part in the matter, and to him belongs the glory of the reconciliation,” said D. Narciso gravely.

“If there is one,” retorted Consejero.

“There will be,” replied the chaplain. “There will be, and D. Martín here will, perhaps, soon have the pleasure of seeing a dear little sister-in-law, who will distract him with her wiles and graces.”

D. Martín, whose heroic soul did not prevent his having a great desire for the inheritance of his



brother-in-law, who was in feeble health, rumped up his nostrils, and muttered rudely :

“ I’m not afraid.”

“ I don’t believe it : I cannot believe it, D. Martín. You can do no less than rejoice that the noble house of Montesinos is not to become extinct, that there will be someone to bear the name honorably. That great house will soon appear well with several children to enliven it with their laughter and their shouts. Father Gil’s work is one of the most meritorious which he has carried out, and he has accomplished some very good things.”

Obdulia fixed a wrathful glance upon him ; but suddenly softening, she replied with an innocent smile :

“ You have no reason to envy him, D. Narciso. Who in town does not remember the numerous marriages which have turned out happily, thanks to your mediation ? Not to go further, all the world knows that D. Feliciano cared very little for Da. Nieves, and you see that they are like two turtle-doves at the present time.”

This D. Feliciano was the husband who, according to secret rumor, had broken D. Narciso’s leg by flinging him downstairs.

The bystanders exchanged looks of alarm. An embarrassing silence ensued. Consejero broke into a laugh, and exclaimed, as he threw a card on the table, as though referring to the game :

“ That goes, come back for another !”

All understood that the remark was directed at Father Narciso, and this augmented the anxiety. The ecclesiastic turned red, and muttered :



"Thanks, thanks. We are all under obligation."

"You go further than obligation requires, father. What you do is, very often, done out of pure devotion," replied Osuna's daughter, with enchanting simplicity.

"Come on!" exclaimed Consejero again, with his eyes fixed on the cards.

"What is this, D. Romualdo?" asked D. Norberto, with a laugh. "Have you got the tray of clubs?"

"Yes, sir; but I console myself with the thought that there are clubs for all."

"But I have none," replied the innocent priest.

"Someone else will get them!"

"Let us all do what we can; but there is no doubt that some can do more than others. Father Gil is a saint, he is an apostle of the early ages of the Church. None of us has the presumption to compete with him, either in jealous zeal or learning," remarked D. Joaquín, coming to the succor of his friend, with a venomous smile, which would have made a stone jump.

"As far as learning is concerned, you may be right," replied Obdulia briskly; "but as for jealous zeal, it seems to me that you are in error. You are too modest. I do not wish to flatter you, but when it is a question of zeal, I think that you are as jealous as anyone, is he not, Da. Serafina?"

A grunt in every way remarkable escaped from Consejero's throat at that moment, immediately followed by a violent fit of coughing, which left



him breathless for several seconds. D. Joaquín also felt a certain pricking in his throat, which compelled him to cough and turn aside his head. Da. Serafina made no reply to the question, for she was engaged in talking with Da. Eloisa.

The conversation changed its course, as though all were tacitly agreed that it had become dangerous. Shortly afterward, it ceased to be general, and the usual small groups were formed again. D. Martín was in bad humor, and disputed over every play. Da. Eloisa discussed tranquilly. Nothing, however surprising it was, ever succeeded in throwing the good lady's nervous system out of order. Her interlocutress, Da. Serafina, continued to direct frequent glances and smiles at her chaplain; but the latter had suddenly become serious and frowning. A cloud of sadness flitted across the beautiful and passionate soul of the widow also, and her glances began to be timid, uneasy, full of mute reproach.

The door bell rang. No one noticed it, except the mistress of the house and Obdulia, whose face turned pale. She fixed her eyes in terror on the door, as though an apparition were about to enter to her; her nerves were in tension under a mysterious magnetic influence. A minute later the curtain was lifted, and the slender figure of Father Gil made its appearance.

All eyes turned toward him with an expression of curiosity. The news of Joaquina's arrival had upset them all; they longed to learn what had taken place. But before anyone could speak, and before the priest had taken a step in the room, Obdulia



rose from her seat, advanced precipitately to meet him, and fell on her knees at his feet. At the same time, she caught his hand and began to imprint upon it strong and eager kisses, while her cheeks were bathed in tears, and sobs burst from her breast. Father Gil tried to tear himself away from these demonstrations, but could not. The repentant damsel held him fast with her convulsively clasped hands. Inexpressibly perturbed, all that he could find to say was :

“Obdulia, calm yourself, calm yourself, calm yourself, for God’s sake ! Rise ! Rise, for God’s sake !”

His white, pearly face, was covered with a vivid crimson flush. A delicate and mysterious gust of emotion ran through the room. Several young women blushed. The ecclesiastics exchanged glances. Consejero, after casting one mischievous look of absolute indifference on the group, turned his face to his cards again, and muttered :

“The Redeemer and the Magdalen !”

But Obdulia finally released the priest’s hand and fell to the floor, seized with a violent nervous attack. Then all the ladies rushed at her and lavished upon her the customary attentions. For similar and identical scenes were of frequent occurrence in this gathering of nervous virgins and mystical widows. The scent bottles and the flasks of antispasm mixtures glittered once more. Then the penetrating odor of ether was disseminated through the room.



## VIII.

“THE distinction between the appellations, organic and inorganic nature, is purely arbitrary. Vital force, as it is vulgarly conceived, is a chimera. There is nothing special about the matter in which life resides. No fundamental element exists in organic bodies which is not also to be met with in inorganic nature; the only special thing is the movement of this matter. Life is nothing more than a particular and more complicated mode of mechanics; a portion of the total matter passes, from time to time, from its habitual course into other chemical and organic combinations; after it has remained in them for a certain period it returns to the general movement.”

With profound emotion did Father Gil read these and other analogous propositions in a book which he had taken from D. Álvaro's library. After he had made a bonfire of the latter's historical books referring to the origins of Christianity, he had not even taken in his hand a single book from his library. He continued to visit the nobleman from time to time, but he avoided all metaphysical conversations. The health of D. Álvaro had visibly declined since the arrival and sudden departure of his wife. His sadness, his wretched condition, inspired the priest with more compassion every day.



The horror which he had formerly felt for him had disappeared. Above the religious and philosophical differences, above the contrariety of intelligence and character, rose vigorously the love for humanity which beat in the profoundly Christian heart of the young priest. D. Álvaro was a brother who suffered. Before this consideration all the rest gives way in souls where the spirit of the divine Nazarene has breathed. But D. Álvaro was not the diabolical wretch he had imagined during the early days of their acquaintance. A demon laughed and talked through his mouth at times, cursing God and men. At other times, nevertheless, he showed himself gentle, affectionate, compassionate, and talked with such innocence that it seemed as though one were listening to a child. Although he was on his guard against him, Father Gil could not help feeling more affection for this unhappy man every day.

One morning the two were chatting in the cabinet of the tower, which served as chamber and library. D. Álvaro had coughed all night long. He was fatigued, worn out. After a while he closed his eyes and remained dozing in his chair. Father Gil thought it better not to wake him to take his leave; neither did he dare to depart without having done so. In this state of uncertainty he began to turn over the leaves of several books, which lay scattered over the table. His eyes fell upon one which treated of geography, and he perused a few paragraphs in an absentminded way. At length his reading began to interest him. The author de-



scribed picturesquely some unknown territories, and certain very curious phenomena of the sea. Father Gil's knowledge in the natural sciences was of the most limited sort. They occupied a very secondary place in the seminary at Lancia; only a few insignificant notions on physics, chemistry, and natural history were required of the graduates. Moreover, he had always cherished for them a sort of disdain inculcated by the rector, his master; the disdain which all ascetics feel toward everything which is related to matter. Thus such descriptions came upon him as quite fresh. The book was celebrated in the scientific world; he had heard it mentioned, but up to this time it had never fallen into his hands. It was called "Cosmos"; its author was Alexander Humboldt. When D. Álvaro opened his eyes at last, and beheld him engaged in reading it, he asked him with a smile:

"Does that book interest you, father?"

"Very much."

"Take the first volume; that is the second."

And rising and pulling it out of one of the book-cases, he presented it to the priest. The latter hesitated about taking it.

"Is it condemned by the Church?"

"I think not," replied the grandee with a smile.

"It is a purely explanatory book, without any pretensions to polemics."

Thus reassured, he carried the first volume home with him, and set to reading it eagerly. It began with an extremely eloquent description of the sidereal world, of the panorama of the celestial



grandeurs. The author unraveled with vigorous pen the immense mechanism of the bodies which revolve in space. Before his astonished vision passed worlds on worlds, systems on systems, in the endless succession of the starry universes, immense spheres rushing in a rapid whirlwind over each other, launched at full speed into the desert regions of the void. What velocity, eternal God! A cannon ball is a tortoise in comparison with them. These spheres, thousands and millions of times larger than our earth, travel hundreds of thousands of leagues in a day. Beneath the irresistible action of colossal forces, mysterious forces, they are hurled through space with the rapidity of the lightning. And all of them are worlds, palpitating with life, in eternal and marvelous fecundity; in the very combinations of their movements they find the renovation of their youth and beauty; there are as many others which are suns, and which disseminate and transmit to the worlds which accompany them their light and life, as our sun does. In them also rise beautiful mountains crowned with snow; the wind breathes through the groves and their landscapes are mirrored in their silent lakes; on their surfaces also the intensity of oceans is unfolded, agitated, turbulent at times; at other times serene, illuminated by the splendors of the crepuscular glow, there also, people suffer, enjoy, struggle, love. And all these habitations of space navigate athwart the celestial ocean without fear of reefs, of collisions and tempests, sustained and guided by an invisible force which never errs. Beyond these



thousands of stars, which we descry by the unaided vision, there are hundreds of millions which we perceive by the aid of the telescope; beyond these hundreds of millions there are other millions of millions besides, which rush through the immensity with terrific swiftness. What appears to us as a white dust, as a light, imperceptible vapor, is a nebula; millions of suns as great as, and greater than, our own, form it, escorted by a legion of planets and satellites which breathe and drink in its breath. And this nebula is nothing more than a province of the ether. Beyond lie others and others still to infinity.

In the presence of these inconceivable movements which drag through the infinite deserts thousands and thousands of suns; in the presence of this colossal cataract, this shower of stars, which wheels incessantly through the abysses of space; in the presence of these incommensurable orbits; in the presence of these distances and velocities, in which the imagination becomes lost, described with the firmness of a learned man and the fire of a poet by Baron Humboldt, the young priest felt himself seized with vertigo. He pressed his hands to his temples and remained for a long time with closed eyes. When he opened them he perceived that his cheeks were wet. Several tears had slipped from beneath his eyelashes.

A profound melancholy invaded his soul. Why? Did not all these marvels proclaim the grandeur of the Creator? Without doubt; but, in spite of this, discouragement suffocated him, like the man who



suddenly finds himself lost in the middle of the ocean.

He was accustomed to estimate his insignificance in the moral order, his wickedness and perverseness compared with the infinite goodness of God. But never had he beheld in so evident a manner the abjectness and the microscopic character of his nature. The earth which we inhabit seemed to him a poor, ridiculous sphere, sailing through space without being noticed or felt by anyone. The wars, the great historical catastrophes and transformations which have taken place upon it, seemed as despicable and as laughable as the struggles of the beings which inhabit a drop of water, and, what was worse, Jesus Christ, whose figure, even in his moments of doubt, had always appeared to him lofty, majestic, now presented itself to his imagination as a grain of sand; the history of the Redemption as insignificant as the fall of a leaf.

He tried to penetrate further into the study of nature. After the "Cosmos" he read a number of books on astronomy, physics, geology. Little by little he became accustomed to see in the phenomena of nature the result of the activity of the forces inherent in matter. The world might have been formed without the intervention of an Intelligence, by the action of the natural laws alone. The ancient idea of an intelligent Architect, of a personal inspirer of the instincts, became gradually weaker in his mind. And when he least suspected it, he began to doubt the existence of a personal God separated from the universe. The act of creation ap-



peared to him inconceivable, absurd. On all sides he beheld the action of a constant force, which operated in accordance with fatal laws, not that of a God who can work by caprice, whose will is capable of arresting these laws.

The idea was appalling. Father Gil made desperate efforts to wrench it from his brain, but in vain. He fell afresh into that painful state of doubt, in which the books of biblical exegesis had left him, only much more painful and miserable because he beheld himself launched full on the current of materialism, far from the idea of God and of immortality. He did battle bravely, trying to represent to himself at all hours the sublime truths of religion, the idea of a God, father of souls, architect and director of the universe, who is offended by our sins, who is softened by our supplications and our tears: he clung fast to these firm doctrines with all his soul; for one whole day he was united with them in fervent longing; but when he felt most secure, an impious, a fatal thought fell upon his brain, and turned it upside down. The idea of a personal God separated from the universe appeared to him absurd, because God would not then be infinite, he would be limited by the world; the belief that our prayers can change the course of the laws of nature, seemed an old wife's tale, fit to deceive children; religion in the mass, a series of myths, more or less beautiful and ingenious, created by the lively but still infantile fancy of man. When he thought this, Father Gil tore his hair and bit his hands; he thrust his brow into the pillow, to see whether he could not succeed in



paralyzing his thought. He had a horror of himself.

Since the lamentable occurrence which had deprived D. Miguel of the licence to confess and say mass, he had stood at the head of the parish. And, although the rector was speedily rehabilitated, the Bishop did not desire that he should again feed the flock of Peñascosa. He did not deprive him of his curacy (this, indeed he could not do), but he gave him a coadjutor to discharge its duties. This post was entrusted, for the time being, to Father Gil, in expectation of a definite nomination. The entire weight and responsibility of the cure of souls in Peñascosa thus devolved upon our priest, at the moment when he most needed that his own soul should be cured, lacerated as it was by doubt. The labor of watching over the interests of religion, of maintaining alive in this town the touch of faith, which had always been for him a source of pure delight, became most grievous, and odious to him; it was converted into a torment. By what right did he ascend to the pulpit of the Holy Spirit to expound the divine word, or listen in the confessional to the sins of the believer, or elevate at the altar the sacred Host, he who doubted whether the words of the Gospel had been pronounced by Jesus or not, whether auricular confession was the divine law, or an institution created in the interest of the hierarchy, whether the sacrament of the Eucharist contained a divine truth, or was a reminiscence of the symbols and the mysteries of the religions of the Orient?



Many an afternoon, oppressed with his own thoughts, he left the house and traversed with long strides the deserted seashore. The breeze refreshed his temples, the sight of the ocean calmed the fever of his brain. He seated himself upon a rock washed by the waves and remained for whole hours, with his ecstatic eyes raised to the horizon. The imposing beauty of this spectacle did not captivate him. Neither the roar of the waves, nor their changing mantle of opal, silver and sapphire, nor the beautiful clouds, crimsoned by the rays of the setting sun, ever completely restored serenity to his brow. The same grief-stricken furrow still lay across it, the same fatal interrogation was ever to be read in it. In this eternal agitation of the waves, is there anything more than a blind force, dashing the atoms against each other? Is the beautiful light which is reflected on the horizon anything more than a vibration of matter? What mystery does yonder bird, which cleaves the air, and darts down into the water to seize an unlucky fish and devour it, conceal within its organism? Am I myself anything else than an individual expression of the force which animates all the beings in the universe?

But the time when these thoughts, always horrible, distressed him like the cords of the rack, and became irresistible, was when he was obliged to exercise some one of the functions of his sacred ministry. If one of these black ideas flashed through his spirit when he was celebrating the holy sacrifice of the mass, or giving absolution to a penitent, he experienced the same sensation as though his brain were



being seared with red hot iron, he was assailed by an anguish which left him paralyzed. He felt as though he were dying. He desired it ardently, in order that he might escape from this torment.

One day he was notified to carry the Viaticum to a hamlet near the town. As it was necessary to traverse the fields for some distance, he went without his bell, and without convoking the faithful. He set out alone, with the sacristan, the bag of the corporal suspended from his neck, and in it the Sacred Form. The road hugged the sea-shore at intervals. Fascinated, as always, by the immensity of the ocean, he turned his attention from the ineffable mystery which he bore upon his breast, ceased to mutter prayers, and yielded up his thoughts to the same meditations which had held him in their clutches for some time past. The rays of the sun, disseminated over the crystal of the waves, impelled him to consider the supreme, omnipotent action of that planet upon terrestrial life. He it is who has created it, who supports it, who renews it. The flower owes to it its perfume, the wild beast its agility and its sanguinary instincts, our souls their sweetest or their most terrible impressions. The sun is the father of all, both of love and of hate. Then he reflected that life is nothing more than an immense dynamism, in whose womb the formidable forces of physics and chemistry are transmuted. All the beings on earth, men, animals, plants, are intimately bound up together. The life of all of them is the same, and this universal life is nothing else than an incessant interchange of mat-



ter. A universal movement carries along atoms with it as it carries worlds. A thousand undulations cross each other in the atmosphere, a thousand forces combine; heat and light, affinity and magnetism unite in the mysteries of the vegetable and mineral worlds. All beings are constituted of the same molecules, which pass successively and indifferently from one to the other, so that nothing belongs to them as absolute property. Our body is renewed in such a manner that at the expiration of a certain time we no longer possess a single grain of the material body which we possessed before. This movement of renovation takes place in each one of the animals, in every one of the plants. The millions of beings who inhabit the surface of the globe live in a mutual exchange of organisms. The molecule of oxygen which I am breathing to-day was breathed yesterday by one of these trees which fringe the road. The molecule of carbon which burns in one of these little piles of dry leaves, which serve to manure the land, may have burned yesterday in the lungs of a hero. Perhaps, in one of these oyster shells which cling to these rocks lies concealed the phosphorus which formed the most precious fibers of the brain of Jesus Christ.

He felt something within him give way and fall. He had completely forgotten that he was bearing with him the divine body of the Redeemer. It appeared to him a thing so strange, so entirely outside the eternal reality, which he saw and touched, that he thought he was dreaming. And without knowing from what dark recesses of his being it came, he



was seized upon by a fierce, impious desire to burst into a laugh. What comedy was this? A little flour kneaded up and baked yesterday by D. Miguel's housekeeper, was transformed by magic art into the person of Jesus Christ, into a being who disappeared from among the living nineteen centuries ago. Were the sovereign, the sublime laws of Nature violated, because a few insects on this microscopic planet, united in council, decreed it? He withdrew his eyes from the sea, and fixed them on the sacristan, who was running on in front, whistling to his dog, who was chasing some chickens. What reverence on the part of this man, who bore at his side the God of Heaven, the Creator of all things! And the laugh surged up in his breast, ever more and more impetuously. It reached his throat, touched his lips, was on the point of breaking forth. A strange trembling made his teeth chatter; he felt his brow bathed in cold perspiration; his sight suddenly grew dim, and he fell senseless to the earth. When he recovered his reason, he was reclining in the arms of the sacristan and two laborers, who had chanced to be passing. They had bathed his face with cold water, opened his cassock, and removed his collar. One of them puffed the smoke of a cigar into his nostrils. The bag of the corporal, with the body of the divine Redeemer, lay on the wall of a field. Father Gil made haste to pick it up, hung it once more round his neck, and after praying for a moment, as he knelt, he pursued his road, without taking his eyes from the ground.



## IX.

D. MIGUEL had been his confessor until his license had been withdrawn. They confessed to each other mutually, as happens among priests. It was to him that he first communicated his doubts. That whimsical old person had been more surprised than shocked by them. They seemed to him so unsubstantial a thing that they did not deserve to have the attention fixed upon them very long. For him, dogmas were like the physical laws of gravity, impenetrability, etcetera. He took them into account without thinking of their existence. The rector of Peñascosa, in the bottom of his heart, regarded the whole touching drama of the passion and death of Jesus as a sort of romanticism which serves as an obligatory accompaniment to the [true religion. This consisted in the mass, the responses, the prayer of the day, the rosary, abstinence from flesh on fast days, and, above all, in the parochial taxes, which he probably considered as coeval with the act of Creation. Consequently, he did not pause to analyze and remove the doubts of his vicar. "Go ahead—Pay no attention—Nonsense!—Let it alone—I'll give it to you!—Why shouldn't he have risen on the third day, you dolt? Don't you see what Saint John and Saint Matthew and Saint Mark say?" Such were ordi-



narily the consolations which he lavished upon him. They sometimes saddened our priest, but at other times he took comfort in thinking that he could not be so damned and accursed if D. Miguel took his terrible doubts with such calm. When the latter was deprived of his licenses, there was no help for it; he was obliged to seek another confessor. Convinced of the hostility with which he was regarded by D. Narciso, D. Melchor, and D. Joaquín, he did not wish to unbosom his conscience to any one of them, although he was well aware that, in the confessional, likes and dislikes have nothing to do with the matter. He betook himself to a young chaplain, even younger than himself, who had recently arrived from the seminary. He was the son of a carpenter of the town, so timid and humble that he hardly knew how to salute, happy at seeing himself elevated above his former rank of life, paying an unlimited respect to all the great powers of Heaven, and to all the petty powers of the earth. This man was deeply impressed by Father Gil's confession, and immediately undertook to convince him that all this proceeded from the devil, and that there was no remedy for it but to subject himself to penance and scourge himself well, pray and fast much. Through a spirit of humility and obedience, the vicar did what his confessor enjoined upon him, secretly persuaded, nevertheless, that it would be to no avail. He had already had recourse to these means, without result. Doubts continued to torment him; they presented themselves constantly, more cruel, more despotic. The timid chaplain



underwent a very bitter experience every time that he confessed to him ; he trembled and grew terrified, as though a misfortune were happening to him ; he suffered so much, and was assailed by such fears, of what he knew not, that he gradually excused himself from receiving the father's confession, and wound up by positively refusing to hear it.

Then it occurred to him that he would go to see D. Restituto, the rector of one of the villages close to Peñascosa, who passed among his colleagues for a wise, prudent man and much attached to his books. It was said that he had a large library, and that in his youth he had passed a brilliant examination for one of the canonries in Lancia, and that it had not been given to him because the Bishop was holding it in reserve for a nephew of his own. Don Restituto, wounded by the injustice, had retired to this rural cure, and had never since been willing to quit it and enter upon a fresh competition. Whether he continued to be devoted to the study of theology, and vented upon it the disappointment which he had undergone, is not known with certainty. He took a pleasure, when some festival or funeral brought him in contact with his colleagues, in displaying his erudition, and in exceeding them in the wit and subtlety with which he defended any proposition ; but the priests of all the neighboring parishes were Moralists ; that is to say, not one of them except himself had studied the full course of theology. There was little glory in overthrowing them in a dinner-table dispute. For the rest, D. Restituto carried on so much husbandry, and was so much



interested in it, that he could not have had much time or much disposition to delve deeply in the Dogmatica or the Patrology.

Our distressed priest set out one afternoon, after dinner, and directed his steps toward the village in which this theologian resided. He knew him tolerably well, but was not on terms of intimacy with him. The village lay about half a league distant. The road was varied and picturesque; narrow lanes, with high hedges of brambles, clumps of trees, paths among the fields of maize and footpaths across the meadows. At the entrance to a narrow pass, above a plain of maize, and with some delicious pasture land in the background, stood the principal houses of the parish. The church and the rectory lay a good ways farther on in a damp and gloomy defile. Everything was slumbering in the most complete silence when the young priest arrived. The hens were pecking in the street in front of the house; a short-tailed tomcat was washing his face, as he sat on the garden wall, and a crop-eared mastiff was sleeping, nose downward, on the platform of the raised granary near the house. This mastiff was charged with breaking the peace of the house by rising in wrath against strangers, barking with a hoarse, extinguished cry, which bore witness to his decrepitude. Father Gil halted, and began to say in a gentle and persuasive tone:

“Good fellow! good fellow!”

The mastiff, seeing that the newcomer was making himself small, swelled horribly. *Guan! Guan!* he shrieked, choosing the most ferocious and intim-



idating register which he could find in his chest. At the same time he riveted a glare of extermination on the priest, and advanced, although with a certain caution, toward him. The latter, terrified by these savage barks, retreated three or four paces and extended his arm with his umbrella, which he had brought to protect him against the sun. "Umbrellas! the resource of cowards!" must have been the mastiff's thought. And he became so boisterous in the face of this last outrage that it would have gone ill with the priest had not an old woman emerged from the door cackling:

"Cuckoo! Cuckoo! Here, Cuckoo! Get away, Cuckoo! Cursed dog! Here! Here! Come here!"

The dog hesitated for a moment, stopped barking, and displayed with tolerable clearness a resolution to return to his slumbers as though nothing had occurred; but the old woman would not be satisfied, she exacted an act of submission.

"Here, Cuckoo! here this very minute!"

Cuckoo dropped his head humbly, and set out toward her with a slow, extremely painful gait, as though the road were bristling with perils.

"Here! Come here, sir!"

"She calls me 'sir,' poor little thing!" said the dog to himself; pomps and vanities produced no effect on him. And he advanced with still greater precautions, making sure of his footing at every step, and wagging his tail in a dizzy manner.

"Here! here!" the old woman continued to scream.

Finally, at the maximum velocity of six paces a



minute, Cuckoo arrived at his destination. The old woman grasped him by the part of his ear which remained, and gave it three or four vigorous tugs. The dog gave vent to a howl of pain. Then she seized the other ear and administered a like number of tugs to it. A still sadder howl. Having paid his dues to earthly justice, the mastiff retreated once more to the platform of the granary, not without launching a few imprecations and blasphemies in a low voice. This scene was repeated several times in the day, whenever, as on the present occasion, any suspicious person arrived at the rectory with hostile intentions. Cuckoo deplored in his inmost soul that they had not cropped his ears more thoroughly.

“Good afternoon, D. Gil!” said the old woman, suddenly exchanging her wrathful expression for a smile, of the most honeyed description, showing that she recognized him.

Father Gil, who did not know her, responded very courteously, and inquired for D. Restituto.

“The Señor Cura must be in the stable. Step in, D. Gil; I will go and call him.”

“There is no necessity; I will go in search of him myself. Is the stable in this direction?”

“Yes, señor; yonder, behind the house.”

Passing entirely round it, the priest ascended a few paces in a narrow, dirty lane, and came upon an extremely wretched building made of stones from the river, barely hewn, with a broken door. The door was shut, and he saw no one beyond. He was on the point of leaving this spot and returning



to the house, when he heard a sound of voices proceeding from beyond the stable. He went thither, and found D. Restituto, in fact, and was not a little surprised at the costume and situation in which he discovered him.

The old rector had on a pair of voluminous corduroy trousers, with patches, such as the peasants in those parts wear; on his feet he wore wooden shoes, with socks of coarse wool; a jacket lustrous with use, and a shirt of linen of his housekeeper's weaving, without either collar or anything to take its place. It was the costume of a day-laborer, with no additions or omissions. But that which rendered his accouterment really uncouth and slovenly, was that on his head he wore an old and greasy cap.

Father Gil halted in amazement at this figure, and was still more amazed when he observed the occupation in which the rector was engaged. With one knee resting on the ground, he was flaying a yearling calf. His servant was aiding him in this operation. The animal lay outstretched between the two, the greater part of it already with flesh laid bare. D. Restituto turned his head at the sound of footsteps, and finding himself in the presence of his young colleague, he rose to his feet and came toward him, grasping an enormous knife in his bloody hands.

“What miracle is this, friend? The future rector of Peñascosa deigns to pay us a visit! Look here, I shall not offer thee my hand, because thou seest the condition in which it is. Thou art in good



health, art thou not? There is no news here, either." D. Restituto addressed all ecclesiastics younger than himself as *thou*, from the very first interview. When Gil had explained to him the motive of his visit, he exhibited a certain degree of surprise, but made haste to reply:

"Good, good, I shall be done directly. Go to the house and wait for me."

But the young man expressed a desire to go to the church.

"To the church?" said the other in surprise. It was their custom to confess to each other at home.

"Very well. There is no objection. Ask my housekeeper for the key, and wait for me there. I shall not be long."

Would to God that he had delayed longer. And, above all, would that he had taken time to wash himself thoroughly. For the theologian exhaled an odor of the slaughterhouse which was perfectly overwhelming. During the entire time that the confession lasted, and it lasted a tolerably long time, Father Gil could think of hardly anything else. He felt suffocated by that nauseating smell; he was attacked several times by pangs and perspirations which came near depriving him of consciousness. D. Restituto experienced real satisfaction at being able to fetch out his entire ancient battery of theological propositions. He answered every doubt which his afflicted penitent presented to him, with a Latin text. As the veteran takes his arms from their nail, with delight at the signal for war, so the former opposer of the prebendary of Lancia took down



from their nail the already musty texts of Perronne and Balmes. How doubt the immortality of the soul, when it is a simple thing, and simple things cannot be decomposed? Who dares imagine that the Catholic Church can perish some day, when the words of Jesus Christ are bleeding here: "The gates of hell shall not prevail (*non prævalebunt*)"? How can one give more credit to the word of man than to that of God? Has not Divine Wisdom said: "For this was I born, and for this came I into the world to bear witness to the truth"? And is not this testimony very clear, and very patent, in all the visible works which exceed natural power; for example, in the healing of the sick, in the resurrection of the dead, and in other admirable miracles performed by Our Lord Jesus Christ, and by the Holy Apostles?

Father Gil received absolution, promising to be no more infatuated and idiotic; that was D. Restituto's judgment of a man who doubted the truths revealed by angelical ministration. Shortly after kissing that hand, not thoroughly cleansed from the blood of the calf, and when he had risen to pray his penance before an altar, our priest felt ill. He was obliged to quit the church immediately, being seized with violent nausea. In the portico he threw up the whole of his dinner. The rector led him to his house, and wished to doctor him with a cup of sage tea, a supreme remedy which he employed against all the ills which afflict the human race; but his young colleague, who knew well the cause of his illness, obstinately refused all remedies. Then the rector proceeded to show him his kitchen garden,



in which he felt as much pride as in the profundity of his theological acquirements. It was full of fruit trees and vegetables. Not a flower, not an ornamental bush was to be seen. Then they passed on to a vast meadow, where several workmen were engaged in building a wall. D. Restituto began to give them instructions, expressed approbation of some things and disapprobation of others, completely forgetting his guest. One of the men informed him that the mill was stopped because Cosme's son had turned aside the water higher up, for the purpose of drying up the drain of the rivulet to fish for eels. D. Restituto flew into a fury, and announced his intention of summoning Cosme and demanding indemnity for damages and grievance. No one should trifle with him; he was resolved to make people respect his property. From here they went to the cornfields, and the rector showed to his colleague, with extreme delight, the magnificent state of the plants. The rain had come just at the right time, but they owed still more to the great quantity of manure which had been applied to them than to the rain.

“Thou wilt say: ‘where can D. Restituto get so much manure from a property like this, of only a fortnight's labor for a yoke of oxen? I will explain it to thee. Although I have nine head of cattle, I could not manure the half of the land which I own. Here is where the *intellectus* comes in! In all parishes, as thou art well aware, there are always a lot of poverty stricken folks, from whom it is impossible to wring a single cuarte, either for baptisms, marriages, or anything else. Well, I compel these



living calamities to deposit from time to time, in front of their houses (to express it vulgarly, their hog-styes), a good quantity of dry leaves or whin. What with the rain, and the treading of the passersby, and the dung of the cattle which cross it, it is converted into compost at the expiration of a certain time. When it is well rotted, they bring it to me, and I keep on making a heap of it, until the season for distributing it over the land arrives. What dost thou think of that?"

They went next to a cultivated meadow. As soon as D. Restituto found himself in it, he gave vent to a sharp, jeering laugh, which caused his young colleague to raise his head and gaze at him with curiosity.

"This is the Lower mill meadow; thou already knowest about the Lower mill meadow. What? Thou dost not know the history of this meadow? It circulated pretty widely in the town. It belonged to the parish cattle, and escaped notice when they were all sold. I took possession of it, and not a soul in the parish dared to denounce the deed. But there was a wealthy tavern keeper here, named Lino (who went to pieces last year, thank God), and this Lino had a great mind for the meadow. At last he gave a hint to the administration, on the sly, because he did not wish to get into my bad books, and they had it sold at judicial auction. Two days before they did this, he came here in a very hypocritical way, and said to me: 'Señor Rector, I am going to make a bid on the Lower mill meadow, but if you desire it, I will remain at home.' The cunning dog



wanted to pump me as to how much I thought of offering. 'No, no, I do not desire it; you may bid it off if you please,' I answered. The man, seeing that I was not going to the auction, and knowing that none of the neighbors was in a position to buy it, counted on getting it very cheap. And I sent to Lancia, to a first cousin of his. But I went to meet him in Peñascosa, and talked to him very much to the point, representing to him the sin that he would commit in bidding for the property of the Church, promised to lease him the meadow, and placed forty duros in his hand. What was the man to do? He went to Lancia, bid in the property, and handed it over to me in perpetuity. What a laugh went up in the town! My friend Lino fell ill with rage, and as soon as an opportunity presented itself, which was at the expiration of two months, as they were returning from a festival, he stabbed his cousin. But, go to, what a pile of good cuartos that stab cost him! He did not make it good with ten thousand reales."

As the sun was sinking low, after showing him a cider-press which he had just built, D. Restituto conducted his penitent to his house once more, and invited him to take a cup of chocolate. But the vicar did not feel thoroughly well. Moreover, he was in haste. He refused all refreshment, and set out on the road to Peñascosa. The rector accompanied him a good stretch on the way.

Having now quitted his property, and divining from the pensive mien of the vicar of Peñascosa that his mind was still burdened with serious thoughts, D. Restituto tried to return to the charge, although



it appeared to him more than amply demonstrated that all his colleague's doubts were nothing more than soap bubbles, which could be dispersed with any breath which Sacred Theology might apply.

"Thou shouldst settle it in thine own mind, my dear fellow," he said to him, with unlimited patronage, "that the truths of faith are not contrary to reason, but that they stand above reason. What is the contrary of the true? Falsehood, is it not? The false, is it not? And how can we hold as false that which has been divinely confirmed? The things which we know by divine revelation cannot be contrary to natural knowledge because natural knowledge also comes from God, since God is the author of our nature. Because a thing surpasses reason, it should not be considered contrary to it. Thus says Saint Augustine, that that which is demonstrated as truth by the holy books, be it of the Old or of the New Testament, can in no way be contrary to it. The human understanding cannot arrive, in a natural manner, at knowledge of the existence of God, supposing that our intelligence in the mode of the present life begins our knowledge by the senses, and that, consequently, those things which do not fall within the limits of the senses cannot be perceived except in so far as the senses can deduce their knowledge."

The evening was cool and mild. The country lay outspread beneath the transparent sky, reflecting in tones of green, pale and yellowish, the rays of the setting sun. The sea lay, an azure blot, in the distance. The two ecclesiastics had already traversed the principal group of habitations, where the



women, as they sat at the doors of their houses, wished them good-evening, and the children ran up to kiss their hands. They had reached the slightly undulating open fields, which characterize the coast of this province. Father Gil walked on in silence, with drooping head, which he raised from time to time, to direct his vague, roving glance at the distant horizon, at the red soil, and the bare rocks which festooned the seashore. The setting sun gave forth its last flames, which reddened one part of the horizon. And from that quarter came a light breeze, which flushed his fingers and the tip of his nose, invigorating his muscles and producing a tickling in his eyes. The landscape, all ready to fall asleep, exhaled a sigh of comfort, a confused mingling of voices and bellowings, a squeaking of carts, a jingling of cattle bells, and a roar of waves, all melting together and harmonizing in the amplitude of the limitless plain. Father Gil forced himself to pay attention to the arguments which his elderly colleague kept pouring forth in a deep and solemn voice. They were the same which he had heard for seven years from the professors' chairs of the seminary at Lancia.

As they left the path and entered a narrow lane, they beheld a herd of cattle advancing slowly to meet them. D. Restituto broke off his theological discourse, and raised his hand to his eyes by way of a screen.

"They are my cows," he said in a low tone.

And before they reached them, he began to shout at the man who was driving them :



"What's the matter with the gray, that she is limping?"

"She must have got a thorn in her foot."

"Then, as soon as thou comest to the barnyard, examine it well, and take it out, dost thou hear? She's the best cow I own"—he added under his breath, turning to his companion.

And, as they were now in the middle of the cattle, the rector approached the gray, in an anxious, paternal manner, and began to caress her poll, at the same time lowering his head to inspect her feet.

"*To, Gray, to, to!* stand still! stand still! It must be a thorn, for I can see nothing in her feet. After thou hast extracted it, wash the foot well, with a little wine and rosemary. Tell Teresa to prepare it for thee. She was born and reared at home, thou knowest?" he continued, turning to the vicar with a softened countenance. "D. Jovino, thy parishioner, offered me sixty duros for her. Not if he were to give me eighty! This jewel shall not leave my house. What breadth of breast, eh? What hind quarters?" (and he caressed them gently with the palm of his hand). "She does not give much milk, but it is pure butter. This other was born on my place also. Quiet, Cherry, be quiet! She is more stupid than the other. But she's a good cow all the same. She dropped her first calf only a fortnight ago. She is fairly running away in milk. Look, look, what teats! She can hardly walk for their weight! Each jet as thick as your finger. See, see. Stand still, Cherry!"

And stooping down, he squeezed one of the ani-



mal's teats, and made two or three jets of milk flow out, which moistened the earth. At the same time, he turned his face, flushed to congestion as much by his attitude as by delight, toward the young vicar. The latter smiled out of politeness, but immediately turned away his eyes, not being well able to repress the repugnance which he felt.

The herd set out once more on the march, and they did likewise. D. Restituto picked up the thread of his discourse again.

"I know there are people who say that it cannot be demonstrated by the reason that God exists, and that this can be obtained by faith and revelation alone. The grossest sort of error. The falseness of this opinion is made manifest by the art of demonstration, which deduces the causes from the effects, and by the very order of the sciences, since if there is no cognoscible substance outside of that which is perceptible to the senses there will be no supernatural science, as is said in *quarto metaphysicorum*. A distinction must be made between what is known in *per se simpliciter*, and what is known *quoad nos*. *Simpliciter* that God is by himself, is known——"

D. Restituto was possessed of a most happy memory. After the expiration of all these years he recalled his Dogmatica perfectly, recited a Castilian translation of it with as much emphasis as though he had invented it. Father Gil remembered it also, for it was a more recent experience with him, but he listened attentively, through humility, forcing himself to admire the force of the arguments, to consider them irrefutable. The old theologian frequently



paused, hesitated over some forgotten demonstration, but suddenly took flight and launched himself vigorously on the premises, compelling them to instantly exude the conclusions desired.

“Everything which moves is moved by something. That which moves is moved or it is not moved. If it does not move itself, then we have what we seek, an immovable motive power, and this is called God. If it does move itself, it is because something moves it, and then, it must go on thus to all infinity, or we must arrive at some immovable motive power; but, in the order of motion, there cannot be any infinite process, *ergo*, we must suppose a primary immovable motive power. We will now prove that all movement is determined by something. If anything moves itself, it is necessary that it should contain within itself the principle of its motion.”

They were walking along a narrow path, opened between the maize fields. The theologian was in front, Father Gil behind. All at once, the former stopped his tongue and his feet firmly. As they turned a corner, they came face to face with Cosme's son, who bore on his shoulder a basket half filled with eels. To catch sight of him and to fling himself unmercifully upon him was but one action for the theologian.

“Scoundrel! greatest of dogs! So it was thou who cut off my water from the mill? I'll flay thee alive! Is it thy father who put thee up to these rascalities? Is it the master who teachest them to thee? Shameless, cynical fellow!”

He held him firmly clutched by both ears, and, at



each question, he gave him a hearty shake. The little lad, comprehending that these queries had a purely rhetorical object, and required no answer, confined himself to uttering inarticulate howls of pain. "Come hither, you vagabond! I'll hale you before your father! I'll see whether you'll tell me now that I bear an ill-will toward you. You'll wind up in jail! Come here, come along!"

And, as it was not easy to drag him by his ears, the former theologian decided, though with profound grief, to release one of them, instantly communicating to the other its share of the pressure, that nothing might be wasted. In this form, his face flushed, his eyes flaming with wrath, he turned back toward the village, without taking leave of his companion, carrying the lad half suspended in the air, while the latter uttered pitiful shrieks.

Father Gil stared at him in stupefaction until he vanished from sight. He remained a few moments longer motionless, abstracted. Then he resumed his way, which led nearer and nearer the seashore, descending by a gentle incline to Peñascosa. The light disappeared moment by moment. The chill increased. The ocean, becalmed, had lost its beautiful azure hue, exchanging it for gray with steely reflections. From time to time, an icy gust sent a shiver across the polished surface of the waters, which ruffled them slightly and momentarily, as though the sea had goose-flesh rise on it. And this shiver communicated itself to the young priest, and penetrated to the depths of his being. What he felt in his soul was neither grief nor agitation, nor



anguish ; it was simply a mortal chill, which gnawed his bones. He had never beheld himself so solitary and helpless. His eyes continued to be fixed obstinately on the ground. He dared not lift them and interrogate the immensity, as he had done on other occasions. He was sure of its reply, and he feared it.

When he reached the first houses of the Gusanera suburb, night had already fallen. As he passed in front of one of the poorest and dirtiest of them, a sound of blows and shrieks proceeding from within attracted his attention. He halted in terror, and tried to make out what it meant. All that he could see through the small, lighted windows, was several shadows in violent agitation. Various oaths which made him quake reached his ears, amid the confused uproar. Suddenly the door opened with violence, and a black mass emerged precipitately, propelled by hands which instantly closed the door again. In this black mass Father Gil recognized a priest. He approached with anxiety, and saw that it was Father Norberto, with his cloak but without his hat.

"D. Norberto ! What is this ? What is going on ?"

"Hallo, my dear fellow. Nothing, nothing, it is nothing," he replied without perturbation.

"Yes, something is going on. What have they been doing to you in this house ?"

"Nothing, nothing. Let us go ; people are assembling."

"Are you going off without your hat ?"

"That is true. I will go ask for it. Wait a bit."



But at that moment the hat was thrown from one of the windows of the house, and flew through the air, landing in the middle of the highway, that is to say, near the two ecclesiastics. At the same time, a rough voice said, accompanying its remarks with various interjections :

“Take your tile, thief. If you come here again, you will depart without your ears.”

Father Norberto made haste to pick up his hat from the ground, and walked away.

“But explain to me,” said the coadjutor, rejoining him, and endeavoring to keep pace with him.

“I will explain it. But further away.”

When they had left the Gusanera behind them, had passed the Square and entered the street of the Quadrant, D. Norberto slackened his steps a little. The vicar profited by the opportunity to insist upon his questions.

“Come, what has happened to you?”

“Why, you see in that house lives a young girl, a child barely fifteen years of age, whose mother has given her over to that huckster known as Pepe of Mancha.”

“And you went thither to see whether you could not rescue her from his clutches?”

“I had already seen her twice, and she seemed not ill-disposed in the matter; but someone, I know not who, gave the man a hint, and to-day he suddenly presented himself and set up a hubbub.”

“Jesus! And are you wounded?” exclaimed Father Gil, perceiving a few drops of blood trickling down the cheeks of his companion. At the same



time, he raised the latter's hat, and saw that he had received a forcible blow on the brow, whence the blood was starting.

"But this is an indignity! Let us go and inform the judge."

"Do not think of such a thing, my dear fellow. It is of no consequence. A complaint would ruin everything; there would be a scandal, and the girl, seeing that she was lost, would leave the town with that fellow. If she remains here, I have some hope of making her quit that devil, by degrees, and reducing her mother to submission. This is nothing," he added, wiping away the blood with his handkerchief. "What pains me rather more is that man——"

"But did he deal you other blows?"

"He gave me a sort of a flogging," the other replied with a candid laugh. "It is only a question of arnica and rest. I think nothing will come of it. He was too cowardly. For some time past I have been invited to eat tripe every day. I am getting too fat, don't you think so?"

Father Gil bade him farewell at the door of his house, and pursued his way, with a lighter step, to his own. It seemed as though he had been relieved of the burden which weighed him down. He felt that the deep melancholy which had oppressed him all the way was mitigated, and that a sweet, inexplicable vibration of well-being coursed through his being.

After interrogating dumb nature, after consulting decrepit theology, the breath of Jesus had, at last, passed through his soul and refreshed it.



## X.

TWO months later Father Gil was seated in his wretched armchair of guttapercha, and resting. The toil of all those days, especially of the last day, had conquered him. It was purely material toil, in which his mind, saddened by impious and horrible thoughts, took pleasure; he had sought a sedative for the inward agitation which tormented him. It was a question of laying the corner stone of the new temple, with a grand religious and civil ceremony. The erection of this temple had been, for long years, the golden dream of the pious inhabitants of Peñascosa. It had always stumbled over insuperable obstacles. On the one hand, money, on the other, the ill-will of the rector, who opposed a stubborn resistance to the project, had caused it to suffer shipwreck repeatedly. But when Gil was given charge of the parish, he took up this subject warmly; he convoked the richest inhabitants of the town, and opened a subscription, which produced good results; he managed to get a large subvention from the city council; he went to Lancia, and interested the prelate and the various grandees, who promised him their concurrence. At last, after much labor and journeying to and fro, the new church became a fact. The first stone was to be laid on the 24th of January, in the presence of the bishop, the governor, various dignitaries



of the cathedral church of Lancia, and many notable persons of the province. We have now arrived at the 23d. The burden of the preparations had fallen on the shoulders of Father Gil, who, aided by persons of good-will who lent themselves to it, had organized not only the religious festival, but also a part of the civil show, the illumination, the bonfires, and the ceremony of laying the corner stone.

During these last days he had had no time to think. He had been less unhappy. But his strength was exhausted by such a petty and annoying occupation, and he was enjoying the luxury of a brief moment of repose, while awaiting the rush of the following day. His eyelids were already closing softly, when the door opened violently, causing him to give a start in his chair. Speechless with surprise, with eyes unnaturally wide open, he saw Obdulia enter like a hurricane, and advance toward him, with discomposed countenance and displaying her wrath and agitation.

"Do you know what is going on, father?" she asked, without saluting him.

The coadjutor made no reply, and interrogated her only with his face.

"I have just learned that the post of coadjutor has been snatched away from you. It has been given to D. Narciso."

"Is that all?" replied the still surprised priest.

"And does that seem a small matter to you?" she exclaimed impetuously. "After you have worked in this town, after you have put everything



in order, after you have succeeded in getting the church built, for it is due to you exclusively, everyone knows that. To take from you that which belongs to you, and give it to D. Narciso! It is an infamy! it is despicable! How well those envious people have managed their intrigue! It had already struck me, that so much traveling to Lancia signified something! Of course, I know very well who has helped him. I believe I know! Da. Filomena is first cousin to the Governor of Madrid, and the affair comes from that quarter. And what shall we say of the bishop who, knowing the services which you have rendered to religion in this town, lends himself to serve as a plaything to a girlish old woman? What an indignity! Did not I warn you in season to be very vigilant? Ah, what a vast infamy! What an infamy! What an unparalleled infamy!"

She spoke tumultuously, with burning cheeks, darting rays of wrath from her eyes, waving her trembling hands, moving her whole slender body as though she were subjected to a strong current of electricity. Father Gil gazed at her in amazement, stupefied. Finally, taking advantage of a momentary vacillation, before she launched forth afresh, and gave vent to another string of affronts, he attacked her with the words:

"I thank you greatly, my daughter, for the interest which you exhibit in what you believe to be an injustice toward me, but which is not so. I have never desired that post nor have I ever done anything to deserve it. The person to whom it is en-



trusted, if what you tell me is true, seems to me most worthy and possesses, among other advantages over me, that of priority. But above all, if an injustice had really been committed against me, what end does this tumult serve? To what end serve these insults to respectable persons, to whom the idea of doing me harm has never occurred?"

Obdulia flushed a deep crimson, and stammered out:

"Because you are a saint."

"A saint, forsooth?" exclaimed the priest, raising his hand impatiently.

"Yes; because you are a saint and look down upon all these things from the height whereon you stand. But it is an injustice, father; it is a villainy," she added, growing excited again. "You are too good to live among these people, and they sacrifice you like a lamb. If it were I! Do you think that it does not pain me to see you humiliated, to see you trod under foot by those insignificant fellows, who are not fit to clean your shoes? Is it not sad that another should reap the reward of your zeal? It may be of no consequence to you, father, but I cannot see you, without my blood boiling, the vicar, the simple assistant of that—that boasting babbler." She dropped into a chair and began to sob; but rising suddenly, she continued, stamping with rage, flourishing her clenched fists in front of the door, in a harsh, concentrated voice which inspired terror.

"Rascals! infamous scoundrels! heretics! Do you believe that you are going to come out ahead in this matter? You shall not, because there is a



God in heaven, and because I am here on earth, and I will declare war on you. See if I don't. You shall learn of what a poor woman is capable! You will not laugh, oh no! You shall see how I shall contrive to cast a drop of gall in your dish of cream, so that you shall not brag again, hogs!"

She ended by feeling ill. Father Gil was obliged to call Da. Josefa, and order her to fetch a cup of linden flower tea, with drops of orange flower water. At nine o'clock at night, the young ladies and the workmen who were helping them had not finished decorating the church. The vigil was sweetly prolonged for all those pious souls who served their Divine Master in such petty tasks with a cheerful spontaneity which was a precursor of that which they would feel in heaven when, transformed into angels, they would surround the throne of the Most High, and sing. Here a curtain which concealed the dimness of the wall, there a chandelier, further on a great jar of flowers, all discussed warmly and at length before they were placed in position. Those who most distinguished themselves in this work of ornamentation, were Da. Marciala and Marcelina, the first by her frenzied activity, the second by her skill and taste. Father Gil presided over the work, as temporary coadjutor, but the majority of the ladies were already paying more heed to the commands of Father Narciso. The news of his triumph had already flown through all Peñascosa, and the ladies, with their natural inclination toward all that shines and acquires flattering prominence in the world, had begun afresh to



feel a certain tenderness toward him. In the groups which formed in the corners of the temple to whisper, casting furtive glances at all his words, he was received with kind and submissive looks, and he was overwhelmed with attentions. In the meantime, Da. Filomena contrived to hide behind them all, and enjoyed in the bottom of her heart this happy event, which was due to her alone, caressing her confessor with a moist, suave gaze in which were depicted tenderness, secrecy, and submission. Obdulia had withdrawn early, unable to endure such nauseous adulation, and the abandonment of her beloved confessor. Moreover, Marcelina had launched a witty and improper remark at her, and, although she had retorted with another even more sanguinary, since she never remained in debt on such occasions, she was afraid of falling ill with rage.

Nevertheless, everything was not pure felicity for the future cherubim of the celestial court. Don Miguel, the terrible rector, disturbed in a thousand ways, each more churlish than the other, the peace of their hearts, now flinging a curtain on the floor, on the pretext that it concealed some image or other, now transporting the jars of flowers whither his caprices dictated, or detaining the messengers and employing them on other errands, and so forth, and so on. No censure or episcopal mandate could lessen the energy of this ferocious eccentric, nor force him to bend his neck. He was the proper rector of Peñascosa, and no power on earth, not even that of the Pontiff himself, could deprive him of that character. Let them appoint



a coadjutor for him. Good, he laughed at the coadjutor, and if the latter went astray ever so little he would enlighten him with a couple of bruises, to make him walk straight. Fortunately for all parties, Father Gil was gentleness in person, and allowed him to do as he pleased, so long as he did not interfere with the cure of souls, and this last, as we already know, was not D. Miguel's specialty. But the ladies protested below their breaths against his tyranny, and hoped devoutly that D. Narciso would grasp the reins of the parish with more vigor.

"Idle creatures! awkward hussies! You would do better to remain in your houses and skim the pot, or darn stockings. Wretched ash pole! If I were your husband or your father, I'd speak my mind to you about playing tricks in the church at all hours." These and other endearing expressions the rector muttered in the corners of the church loud enough to be heard. And it was clear that these mystic roses, when they heard him, quivered in their calyxes and folded up timidly. They murmured bitter complaints in each other's ears, but dared not utter them aloud. D. Miguel was capable of kicking them out of the church. As the rector found no occasion to do this, he relieved his heart by administering a couple of kicks to any acolyte who chance to cross his path.

While this was taking place in the church, an immense crowd was thronging the doors of the *Agora*, where its worthy president, D. Gaspar de Silva, was engaged in drilling two dozen young working girls in a hymn of his invention,



with music by the director of the municipal band, to be sung during the banquet in the theater. And the silvery voices of the chorus soared, at intervals, through the windows of the house, arousing in the multitude unlimited enthusiasm, which broke forth in applause and hurrahs. So that, after a while, various very worthy townspeople, fishermen by profession, demanded in shouts that D. Gaspar should present himself at the window, that they might render him his due tribute of honors. The great poet was forced to yield to this demand of the multitude, which received him with thunderous clapping of hands and loud shouts. The angular silhouette of the bard was detached against the arch of the window, and it could be clearly seen that he raised his hand repeatedly to the region of his heart, whereupon the enthusiasm of the multitude was converted into downright delirium.

A wind of pleasure, of pure and fervent joy, swept through the inhabitants of the noble town. They had always longed for a more worthy and more capacious temple, but they had never thoroughly comprehended its importance. Only when they knew positively that one was about to be erected on the Square, of greater dimensions than all those in Sarrió, did they feel moved to the very last fibers of their patriotism. There was no one, great or small, who did not repeat with frenzy: "Forty-five fifty long, and thirty twenty-five broad. The cathedral of Sarrió is only forty by twenty-eight fifty." Another dose of ineffable joy was reserved for the hearts of the meritorious Peñascosians. The



pavement of the new church was not to be of common pavingstones, like that of Sarrió, but of glazed tiles; the altars were to be cut in Italy, the crystals in London; the principal altar was to be entirely of marble. Each of these details, repeated from mouth to mouth, caused them to shed tears of tenderness.

A temporary stage had been erected on the Square, on the site which the new temple was to occupy, for the authorities, the grandees of the town, and the ladies. From this platform the bishop was to lay the corner stone, which already hung suspended by silken cords, completely ready. In the theater the banquet table, garlands and trophies were being put up, and the hammering was incessant. Over each of the stalls, called boxes, they hung two national banners, crossed; a garland of laurel connected them all in a graceful manner. This was the idea of D. Peregrín Casanova, who had presided over a banquet in the theater of Tarragona, during the fortnight of his reign over that province. Finally, on the Field of Discouragements, the wires were already stretched for the illumination, although the lanterns were not yet hung upon them. This had been postponed to the last moment, through fear of rain.

There was no danger. The twenty-fourth dawned serenely. A few impertinent little clouds, which had piled up near the earth, on the inland side, were very promptly swept away by the breeze from the northeast, with great applause from all the sensible persons in the population. The sea rippled



softly, smiling at the privileged town, and the sun reared his disk majestically from behind the waves, disposed for once in his life to give pleasure to the honorable Peñascosians. For, since time immemorial, it had been known, that, no sooner was a festival got under way in Peñascosa, than the sun took to his heels, and left the clouds to give what account of him they could. Four dozen dynamite shells, capable of making the very dead shake in their tombs, announced his arising. The municipal band saluted the star of the day by playing in the streets the famous Umbrella Polka. Then it planted itself on the Field of Discouragements, surrounded by a swarm of children, and executed several operatic selections. The sea, beating gently against the rocks, served as contrabass. Toward nine o'clock they marched in the direction of the Square, playing a double quickstep, and thence they struck out upon the highway to Lancia, to await the bishop, the governor, and the persons who accompanied them.

These personages speedily arrived in six coaches, which made the town quiver with joy at the rumbling of their wheels. A cloud of rockets soared into the air. The travelers were received on the Square with immense shouts. Every Peñascosa man who possessed the use of his lower extremities, quitted his domicile that day to rejoice his eyes with the sight of the fine company. The bishop was a tall, stout man, with white hair and round face, like the full moon adorned with spectacles. The governor was a weak, puny, pale little man, with hollow eyes.



He was dressed in his grand uniform, and the ribbon of Isabel the Catholic lay across his breast. The persons who accompanied him were equally brilliant with crosses, uniforms, and decorations. Behind them marched a detachment of carabineers. At the sight of this brilliant and splendid procession defiling before them, the fancy of the patriots of Peñascosa, always inclined to exaltation, carried them away in an inexplicable manner. The pride of having been born in that favored town intoxicated them as it never had done before. For one instant they believed that they were in the capital of a great empire, that the eyes of the whole civilized world were fixed on Peñascosa. The intoxication must have been irresistible when it went to the head of so grave and competent a person as D. Juan Casanova to such a degree, that he even walked in front of the party, hat in hand, gesticulating and talking to himself like a madman. "When could we have dreamed," he exclaimed, waving his hat, "when could we have dreamed that so many notabilities, so many eminent personages of the clergy, of the administration, of the army, would come together in our town? Rejoice, fellow-citizens of Peñascosa! Rejoice! For us the era of justice is beginning. This poor town, so left in the lurch, you know well by whom . . . this poor, neglected town, raises its head at last, and will proclaim to the whole world its worth—that is it—its worth! If we have been the slaves, hitherto, of another town, which is inferior to ours, we have broken our chains now. Come to your windows, fair dames of Peñas-



cosa! Come to your windows and scatter flowers over our illustrious guests! Come forth! Come forth!"

D. Juan Casanova had gained much in emotion and in heat during this tirade. His voice had become hoarse and tremulous. But impartiality compels us to confess that he had lost something of his characteristic majesty. At least those discomposed movements of the shoulder and head were inexcusable in a man so morally and physically elegant. The children who walked beside him regarded him with alarm, and the fair dames of Peñascosa evoked by him, if they did not scatter flowers, did smile from their windows at the sight of him in so slovenly a state, displaying rows of teeth such as you will never behold in Sarrió, I can assure you under oath.

After taking refreshments in the town-hall, and resting a little, the company returned to the Square, where the act of laying the corner stone of the new house of God was performed with a solemnity capable of making the most hardened atheist shed tears. One of the persons who bustled about and intermeddled most was the apothecary, D. José María, the former subscriber to *The Insurrection*, and the associate of masons, thus furnishing clear testimony that nothing is impossible with God, and that no one can say that he has been completely abandoned by His hand. Then the governor made a speech from the platform to the people, and although his discourse did not reach more than three or four meters, the people comprehended, with wonderful



instinct, that it was crammed with eloquence, and they became frantically enthusiastic. Hundreds of kerchiefs of all colors plowed the air, in token of the magic effect which the oration of the first civil authority in the province had produced upon them. The rockets and the municipal band seconded this glorious manifestation of the kerchiefs. An immense multitude of blue blouses and striped trousers moved in an agitated manner, stirred by the most noble and humanitarian sentiments.

All immediately proceeded to the parish church, to sing a *Te Deum* of gratitude. The temple, adorned, as we are already aware, by the women of the most select society in Peñascosa, was glittering with metal sconces, chandeliers, and tapers. On the preceding day, a slender orchestra had arrived from Lancia, consisting of two violins, a violin-cello, and a contrabass, and with it, three or four of the cathedral singers. The musicians placed themselves in the choir, the bishop and priests in the chancel. D. Miguel, the obstinate rector, would not don the sacred vestments, under pretext of his indisposition, and retired to the choir with the orchestra. The prelate delivered a brief and sensible sermon from the pulpit. He had a fine baritone voice, which made the most delicate cords in the hearts of all the mystic roses in town vibrate. The brilliancy of his pectoral cross in diamonds, and of the crystals of his spectacles, lent greater luster and a magic power to his sweet, sonorous, persuasive words.

Then the *Te Deum* was sung. The trebles and



basses from Lancia cathedral gave forth prodigious quavers, which astounded the good people of Peñas-cosa. The diminutive orchestra supported them admirably. But lo! D. Miguel took it into his head to look with malevolent eyes upon the poor contrabass, because he only passed his bow across the strings now and then. The rector was on his knees, and in front of him was the musician, with his back turned toward him. He glanced at him from time to time, and on each occasion with increasing excitement. The musician was doing his duty by scraping the strings parsimoniously, and producing a dull, antipathetic roar. This appeared to D. Miguel the height of stupidity, and slothfulness. To come all the way from Lancia, at a good salary, with the journey paid for, to make a few *ron, rons*, with that utensil, was really a very irritating thing. The flood of indignation continued to swell in his bosom. A thousand thoughts of extermination mounted to his brain, while his grim and sinister gaze remained riveted on the shoulders of the unlucky contrabass, who was, certainly, very far from conscious of the sanguinary thoughts which his inoffensive person inspired at that moment. Finally, having allowed a chord more harsh and strident than the rest to escape him, the old rector could wait no longer, and rising briskly, he bestowed upon him a kick in the loins which caused him to fall headlong. The musician and his instrument rolled noisily on the floor. All the faithful raised their heads at this uproar. Having satisfied justice, D. Miguel returned to the position which he had previously



occupied. When the unfortunate musician came to inquire why he had done this thing, he replied that he wanted no lewd persons in the church, and that the man would do well to take himself off as far as possible with his hulk of an instrument, as he could not promise to contain himself.

The *Te Deum* being concluded, a few more dozen dynamite cartridges were exploded in the air, as was logical. The Pepaina's two sympathetic sons, Chola and Lorito, came near perishing, victims to their daring, through taking possession of one of them which had not burst. When D. Miguel learned that they had burned their faces and hands, he declared, in consonance with all the Holy Fathers, that he believed in the direct interposition of Providence in human affairs.

A little later, the banquet in the theater began. All the guests from Lancia took part in it, with the exception of the bishop and his familiars. There were more than a hundred diners, who occupied three parallel tables, situated in the precincts of the stalls. On the stage was placed the chorus of maidens drilled in the *Agora* by D. Gaspar de Silva and the director of the municipal band. The boxes were occupied by all that was aristocratic, elegant, and exquisite which Peñascosa contained within its bosom. Hardly was the soup served when D. Gaspar's hymn was heard. It began with a sort of prolonged recitative in lugubrious notes, executed by a light tenor, a cabinetmaker by trade. He said, if we recollect aright:



“Peñascosa, yesterday sad,  
Happy to-day,  
Shakes off the apathy in which she lived  
And launches out on progress with enthusia-a-a-asm  
And la-a-a-aunches out on progress with ardor.”

After this tirade, gloomy as a dirge, which the tenor sang with all the emphasis of which a cabinet-maker is capable in such cases, the maidens broke in vigorously with the allegro:

“The town, in animation  
And full of hope,  
La-a-a-aunches out upon enjoyment  
With magic ardor.”

This hymn, of classical cut and which may be compared, without discredit, with the most inspired efforts of the ancient priests, in case we were acquainted with any of these, immediately awakened in the minds of the diners, and in those of the public, a thousand ideas of indefinite progress and perfectability. For one moment, all those lofty spirits lived two centuries in advance, and beheld with the eyes of the spirit an ideal Peñascosa ornamented with factories and breweries. Marvelous power of poetry! They applauded furiously with their hands and with their spoons. And, although some person of light and effeminate spirit declared that what he was applauding was the black eyes and white teeth of the Peñascosa women, we are certain that the majority knew how to appreciate the pure intention and the classicism of the bard of Peñascosa's hymn. The proof is that when a cry was heard from one of



the stalls: "Let the author come forth!" the people in all the other stalls began to shout the same thing, and the invited guests expressed the same desire, with their mouths full. D. Gaspar finally made his appearance on the stage, and advanced, bent like a bow, to the edge of the platform. Then, making an effort over his corns, he turned round hastily, and went to the foyer to get the author of the music, a plump little man, who presented himself with his hair standing stiffly upright like that of an apparition. The public broke into warm applause at the sight of them, hand in hand. D. Gaspar pointed at the composer of the music, as though to say, by signs: "To this man you owe everything." The director of the music pointed to D. Gaspar, with the same mimicry: "The triumph belongs to this gentleman." Finally, unable to express in a more plastic manner the profound admiration which each cherished for the other, and the perfect concord of their enthusiastic spirits, they embraced in the middle of the stage, and remained clasped in each other's arms for a considerable time.

We know not what mysterious, magic influence the act of embracing executed by two individuals of the same sex can exercise upon an audience; but, on every occasion when we have witnessed it, we declare that it has produced the same surprising effect. The public rises, electrified, shouts, applauds, pulls out its handkerchief, gesticulates violently, and there are even some ladies who shed tears. Why? Do not ask us. We think that science has not yet reached the point where it can



furnish a satisfactory answer to this problem. It was a vertigo, a delirium; the uproar lasted more than ten minutes, while Euterpe and Thalia remained in a close embrace. When the tumult began to subside a little, a voice was heard to say: "Let them kiss each other!" It appeared that the person who launched this cry was a journalist from Lancia. If it were intended as a jest, it certainly was very ungracious. To jeer at so solemn an act, in which the moral and material regeneration of Peñascosa was being celebrated, was an insolence, and, as D. Juan Casanova very well expressed it, "did not give a favorable idea of the culture of the press of Lancia." Accordingly, they did not kiss, although D. Gaspar showed a tendency to do so, as he approached his violet-hued nostrils very close to the face of the ghost; but the latter drew back, exhibiting signs of prudence, since people talked in very grave terms throughout Peñascosa, of the nostrils of D. Gaspar.

The hymn terminated, then it was begun again and repeated to the very end. The governor addressed the public once more. Some governors have a reputation for destituting councils, others for carrying off the mattresses which the provincial deputation places under them. This one had a reputation for eloquence. D. Peregrín Casanova replied to him and took advantage of the opportunity to call him "my distinguished colleague," and to allude to the lofty duties imposed by the government of a province, "which he had striven to fulfil in former days according to the measure of his weak forces." D.



José María, the apothecary, spoke also, advocating the support of religion as an "element of progress"—he retained a few little phrases from his free-thinking days—and as a "curb on illegitimate appetites." D. José, the tobacco merchant, spoke; D. Remigio Florez, the manufacturer of alimentary preserves, spoke; the director of *The Future of Lancia*, who had fought a duel with swords, a few days before, with D. Rosendo Belinchon, the director of *The Sarrió Beacon*, spoke. Then the governor spoke again. An editor of *The Sarrian Youth* tried to utter a few words, but he was interrupted by several murmurs from the boxes, and resumed his seat, greatly abashed. Finally, D. Gaspar de Silva advanced to the front of the stage, holding a paper in his hand. "Silence! Tss! Tss! Keep quiet! Silence! Out with him! Tss! tss!" In the midst of a religious silence, the famous bard of Peñascosa began to read, in a dramatic voice, an "Ode to Religion." Sacred themes were not his specialty. He had always preferred to place his lyre at the service of liberty and democratic ideas. His best composition was a sonnet to the "Sinalagmatic Bilateral Fact." Comprehending, nevertheless, with profound intuition, the sublime destiny to which heaven had appointed him, he sang, like the bards of old and the demagogues of antiquity, everything which offered itself to his vision: peace and war, democracy and principalities, religion and free thought. This ode, which began: "Oh, religion, sweet, immaculate!" was a highly inspired production, and was received with lively tokens of ap-



proval. The banquet ended after nightfall. At six o'clock the sacristan and some employees of the municipality began to light the little lamps in Venetian fashion, in the Field of Discouragements, so that, by eight o'clock, they were nearly all aglow. The evening turned out very merry. In one corner of the Field the villagers danced, to the sound of the pipe and tambourine; in another the artisans did the same, to the music of the city band. The populace wandered over the free space with constantly decreasing freedom, since the street of the Quadrant did not cease to discharge blue blouses and percale kerchiefs, over the Field in question. The most exquisite portion of Peñascosa society took refuge in the church porch, establishing the division of castes with which the reader is already acquainted. A procession was immediately organized where the strangers from Lancia could appreciate, at a single glance, all the majesty and grandeur which Peñascosa inclosed in its bosom. There were the members of the evening assembly in the house of Da. Eloisa, and, in addition, another part of the nobility of the town, with which we have not been able to bring the reader into contact. After having enjoyed for a long space the pleasure of seeing themselves, like the immortals in Olympus, isolated and above the rest of the beings of creation, this society made an incursion into the Field of Discouragements, to take a look at the fireworks from the renowned makers of pyrotechnics in Pelente. They entered without losing their composure, with disdain and gravity calculated to fill the hearts of the lower orders with respect.



Obdulia, agitated all day by an intense grief and a raging desire to repair the injustice of which her beloved spiritual director had been the victim, remained at home and in bed. She was really ill. She had a fever, the fever which is produced in temperaments like hers by one exclusive thought, which becomes more and more exacerbated. When night came, she rose and dressed herself hastily. The great blue circles round her eyes were now marked in a shocking manner. A deep wrinkle, the sign of irrevocable determination, furrowed her brow. She summoned her maid, and informed her that she desired to go out to see the fireworks. The woman did her best to dissuade her, representing to her the serious injury which the cold and dampness of the night might cause her, but in vain. She seized her mantilla, threw it over her head, with convulsive hands, compelled the servant to put on hers, and they issued forth into the street. The Field of Discouragements was already swarming with people. It cost them many efforts to advance and place themselves in the center of it. Obdulia was resolved, at any price, to approach the house of the rector, where the bishop was lodged. She had seen the latter's spectacles glitter in one of the windows, and then vanish. Beneath, at the very door of the rectory, a numerous group of girls was dancing the "Giraldilla," and singing at the tops of their voices couplets appropriate to the occasion, which they improvised on the spur of the moment. In them they alluded to the new church, lauded the bishop, the governor, the grandees of Peñascosa, with-



out omitting, of course, the customary stab at Sarrió.

The imagination of Osuna's daughter worked without cessation, increasing the fever which was consuming her. But, above all the thousand thoughts and fancies which revolved within her, loomed one fixed, tenacious idea, which unconsciously impelled her to force her way through the throng, followed by the maid, who did not understand her mistress's energy. When they reached the vicinity of the rectory, the young woman halted for a few minutes. She watched her maid out of the corner of her eye, and when she saw her wholly absorbed in the contemplation of the fires which were burning, she maneuvered cleverly and edged away from her, hiding among the crowd. Once alone, she halted again. After casting an infinite number of glances of fear and anxiety at the rector's house, after turning round more than twenty times and repenting as often, she finally slipped like a shadow behind the girls who were dancing and the circle of spectators which surrounded them, and made her way into the porch of the house. In it stood several servants gossiping as they saw what they could from that point. They had the door open; and Obdulia, without saying a word to them, passed through it and ascended some staircases. Then pausing suddenly, and remaining a moment in indecision, she descended them once more, and approached the group of domestics.

"Is the bishop's secretary upstairs?" she inquired of the one who stood nearest.



"D. Cayetano? Yes, señora, he is upstairs," replied one of the most distant.

"Can I speak a few words with him?"

"Why not? I will inform him. Come up with me."

They ascended D. Miguel's dim staircase, which had not been cleaned even in honor of the bishop's visit.

"Have the goodness to wait here a moment."

Shortly after, the secretary made his appearance, a middle-aged ecclesiastic, ugly, slovenly, but with a frank, intelligent face.

"You asked for me, señora?"

"Yes, señor."

"You wish to say——"

"I desire to speak with the bishop."

The secretary looked at her again, and with still more curiosity, and after hesitating an instant, a faint smile made its appearance and he said;

"You will understand that the hour is not opportune. His Illustriousness is on the point of retiring to rest."

"What I have to communicate to him is urgent, and of great importance," she said precipitately.

Again the ecclesiastic scrutinized her with a piercing glance, and noted her agitation.

"Good. What I can do to serve you, is to inform His Illustriousness. I do not promise that he will receive you at this hour. You may pass into that room and wait a moment. I will bring you his answer without delay."

He opened the door of the little reception room,



caused a lamp to be brought and left her alone. At that moment, the young woman felt that all her strength was abandoning her. Her heart began to beat violently in her bosom. The house rocked gently like the cabin of a vessel. She found herself obliged to support herself with both hands on the back of a chair, to keep from falling. The secretary made his appearance again at the expiration of a few moments, and without crossing the threshold, he said with affected solemnity ;

“ His Illustriousness will be here directly.”

Obdulia closed her eyes, and clutched the chair more firmly. When she opened them, the imposing form of the prelate stood before her.

The room lay in a half light, owing to the shade which covered the lamp. The outlines of his form melted into the shadow. But the diamonds of his pectoral cross darted sparks of light, and the glasses of his spectacles also shone in the feeble rays of light which fell upon them. He advanced a few paces into the room. Obdulia fell upon her knees.

“ Is it some matter of conscience, my daughter ? ” asked the prelate gently presenting her his ring to kiss.

“ Yes, sir,” replied the young woman in a voice altered by emotion. “ It is a case of Your Illustriousness’s conscience.”

“ Of my conscience ? ” exclaimed the bishop, drawing himself up slowly, and casting down upon her a glance of surprise and curiosity.

“ The purest conscience, as Your Illustriousness is better aware even than I, is subject to error. When we think that we are doing well, we are doing ill.



The soul of Your Illustriousness is noble, and it is holy, according to what I have been told by all who know you. For some reason God has elected you to feed his flock. But the eyes of Your Illustriousness do not penetrate everywhere, like the eyes of God. Your arm is extended in vain to bless. The benediction does not reach all. Among the pastors whom Your Illustriousness has appointed to aid you, there are some who guard the flock with fidelity and love, there are also some who keep their eyes and their love riveted upon themselves."

"Rise, my daughter. What do you mean to intimate by these words?"

"What I mean to intimate, señor," said Osuna's daughter audaciously, speedily recovering her serenity under the impulse of exaltation, "is, that we have in this town a zealous coadjutor, who is a model of abnegation, of gentleness, of activity, who had succeeded, by dint of immense sacrifices, in inspiring with devotion and piety many who had never felt them, who, without any violence whatever, has restored order to the parish and restored to God that which belonged to him. Moreover, I have heard, all we parishioners have heard with grief, that instead of leaving him in the post which he has been filling temporarily, Your Illustriousness has given it to another person."

The bishop gazed at her in silence for a good space. The young woman, beneath this gaze, which passed through the glasses of his spectacles piercingly, inquiringly, lost her serenity once more.

"It is the temporary coadjutor who has sent you



to make representations to me?" he asked very quietly, enunciating every syllable in a manner to render it epigrammatic.

"Oh! no, sir!" exclaimed the young woman in extreme perturbation, turning very red. "The señor coadjutor has no aspirations whatever. He is as contented with the post as without it. He knows nothing, and I desire that he shall know nothing. It is I who, because of the hatred with which injustice inspires me, have ventured to take this step—perhaps, imprudently."

"No perhaps! no perhaps!" muttered the prelate, shaking his head.

He stared fixedly before him for a moment without even winking, absorbed in intense contemplation. Obdulia dropped her head.

"My daughter," he began again gravely, "youth has its rights. It may be giddy, thoughtless; it may enjoy without measure all the gifts with which God has favored us; it may live in darkness, without a thought of sin. But youth has no right to play with our eternal salvation, with life and death. The Holy Catholic Church has its ministers, charged with watching over the faith. I, unworthy as I am, am one of them, and I am responsible to God and to the Supreme Pontiff for my acts. I have not learned, in any Holy Father, nor in any decretal, that prelates are obliged to give an account of themselves to children like you."

"Oh, Señor Bishop, I did not mean——"

"Listen, listen with patience, my daughter; listen on your knees to your prelate."



Obdulia knelt down again, filled with confusion, and as red as a poppy. The bishop's corpulent figure grew immeasurably great in her eyes; his white head, crowned with the violet calotte, was resplendent with majesty.

“The offices of the Catholic Church ought not to be posts which are coveted; they are not to be sought, but to be accepted with humility and resignation. The more lofty the office, the more difficult and thorny is it for him who desires to serve God. In speaking of injustice, you have evidently regarded it as an advancement, and in that you have sinned grievously. If the office of coadjutor has not been bestowed upon the person in whom you take an interest, that person should thank me, since I have released him from many terrible responsibilities, which render more difficult his eternal salvation.”

Obdulia, perceiving that the lightning was directed against her confessor once more, found words to turn it aside.

“I must repeat to you, Señor Bishop, that Father Gil knows nothing of this step—that he would die of pain and shame if he were to hear of it, because he is modesty and humility personified. The esteem and respect which I feel for him, in company with all the inhabitants of this town, and my desire to see the parish in order, and well served, have impelled me, in a moment of giddiness, to apply to Your Illustriousness.”

“But do you not understand, my daughter, that by taking this strange step, extraordinary in a sen-



sible and pious person, you have compromised yourself, and, what is worse, you are seriously compromising a priest?"

"O Holy Virgin! what have I done?" exclaimed the young woman, covering her face with her hands. "Yes, yes, now I understand that I have been a mad woman, that in seeking to do him good I have caused a terrible evil. Your Illustriousness despises me, and you are right, for I am only a poor fool. But that is not the worst of it. The horrible part of it is that henceforth you will be prejudiced against a poor innocent. Jesus of my heart, what a temptation mine has been!"

And she broke into wild sobs, murmuring unintelligible phrases. The prelate bent over her and spoke gently to her.

"Calm yourself, my daughter, and learn that a successor of the Apostles can feel neither prejudice nor hatred. If you have sinned, ask absolution from your confessor. Compose yourself, you have done no harm to anyone but yourself. Neither the innocent nor the guilty have anything to fear from me. Let all their fear be of God."

After demanding pardon repeatedly, and shedding innumerable tears, Obdulia kissed the prelate's ring once more with devotion, and rose. Without raising her eyes from the floor, she murmured feebly:

"Farewell, Señor Bishop. May Your Illustriousness forgive the displeasure which I have caused you and forget it."

"May the Most Holy Virgin protect you, my daughter. Recite a salve for me, for I need it



greatly," replied the prelate, allowing her to pass, and gazing at her with an expression of pity, which followed her until she had made her exit.

She emerged stunned, mad with shame, with trembling hands and blazing cheeks. As soon as she reached home, she flung herself on her bed in a high fever.



## XI.

“THE enigma is already deciphered, Father Gil,” said D. Álvaro from his armchair, as he saw the latter enter. The smile which accompanied these words was so convulsed and strange that it gave one a chill.

“What enigma?” asked Father Gil, somewhat agitated by the presentiment of a misfortune of some sort.

“Be not alarmed; it is not the enigma of Creation, but one more modest—that touching the visit of my wife to Peñascosa a few months ago. Read this letter.”

The young priest took from the heir’s hands the offered letter and read:

MY DEAR ÁLMARO: I have just learned that Joaquina gave birth to a child six days ago, which has been inscribed in the parish and in the civil register under your name. I have made inquiries, and I have been informed that it is perfectly legitimate, since your wife was in Peñascosa a few months ago, and slept in your house. I write in haste to ask you if it be true. I doubt it greatly, since you have never said a word to me on the subject. Reply immediately.

JULIO.

Father Gil dropped his arms, bent his head, and exclaimed in a low voice:

“What infamy!”



The heir broke into a laugh.

"But do you still believe that there are infamies in the world? Of what use to you is all that you have read? Evidently, you are present at the first performance of the comedy. I am at the second, and I can tell you in advance what will happen."

"At all events, D. Álvaro, I am sorry in my very soul for this disgrace which has been put upon you, without your deserving it."

"Disgrace? Do you call the spider disgraceful, when it stifles a poor fly in its web, or the hawk, when it swoops down upon the innocent little chicken and bears it off through the air? Then the same infamous force (it really is infamous!) which moves the spider and the hawk, is that which dwells within my wife. The fly, the chicken, and I deserve the same fate, for having been born! 'For the greatest of man's crimes consists in having been born,' as Calderón has said, and he was a priest like yourself."

Father Gil meditated for a few moments, and said at length, as though speaking to himself:

"I cannot persuade myself that there does not exist in us something more than a blind force; that the light which burns from time to time in the breasts of men, and which is sometimes called justice, at other times love and abnegation, depends exclusively upon chemical combinations. Infamy is always infamy, and awakens in our mind a sentiment of repugnance. The spider and the hawk do not know that they are doing evil, but your wife does know."



“What does it matter? Endow the beast with a consciousness of its acts, and you have formed man. Conscience is only a torch. Crimes can be perpetrated in the dark as well as in the light. If I thought like you, that there is a God, the conscious creator of all beings, I would waft him a kiss, and congratulate him on having made so amiable and enchanting a creature as my wife, and thank him for having reserved her for me in particular. Unfortunately, I cannot imagine this God receiving, in dressing gown and slippers, my cards of congratulation. I am more inclined to think that she and I are victims of logic. Life has for its immediate object, grief. Deduce the consequence for yourself. My wife was born with claws to scratch withal. I was born with a tender heart expressly to be scratched. It would be a contradiction if she did not scratch, and if I were not scratched.”

“Nevertheless, you have loved that woman with all your soul!”

“Ah, yes!” exclaimed the nobleman, closing his eyes and passing his thin fleshless hand over his brow.

“I did love her! For a moment I was the equal of the immortals in Olympus. Felicity sang in my soul the most beautiful hymn that ever accompanied their divine games. The sun rose and set only to gild my illusions. The sea murmured only to reflect the golden images which flitted through my mind. No man was ever hunted for the good of the race with more precautions, with more exquisite care. All the snares which Nature spreads for us,



in order to realize her mysterious plan, may be avoided; even the will to live may be conquered—I have already conquered it, since I crave death with avidity. But this desire to perpetuate oneself which is exhibited in all the race, this sovereign force which forces an individual toward another individual of a different sex, is insuperable, take my word for it, father. What a well turned arm! What alabaster shoulders! What a fascinating way of drawing off her gloves, and moving her little finger, which is very pretty.”

“I am not acquainted with love, but I know that there are two sorts: one which has for its object solely sensual enjoyment which would make brutes of us, and another, the pure love of two souls which complete each other, of two hearts which unite to enjoy and suffer together, to form one being until death. That is the love which ennobles us, the only one which is worthy of a human being, and which deserves the name.”

“In fact that is what all petty poets, and weakly women think. But you are a serious person, and you cannot believe in such nonsense. Love is nothing more than a wile of Nature, father. In order to conquer our egoism, which is very great, she cheats us with a delusion, making us believe that what we desire is our own felicity, whereas it is the good of the species. The individual is the unconscious slave of——”

A violent fit of coughing interrupted him. He motioned to Father Gil to give him the handkerchief which lay on the table, and raised it to his



mouth. When he removed it, it was stained with blood. A smile of mortal sadness convulsed his lips, at the sight of this blood.

"This is the only lover who never deceives, father," he said, showing the handkerchief to the young priest, who had turned pale. "You see the kiss that she has just given me. To-morrow she will give me a longer one; then another and another, until she takes me in her cold arms, and clasps me forever."

And the terrible part of it was that he was right. D. Álvaro's health, which had never been strong, had been declining visibly for some time past; probably since the unexpected visit of his wife. He had grown much thinner, thin as he had always been. His complexion had turned from pale to earthy in hue; his eyes had lost their mobility, and gained in brilliancy; his hands seemed those of a skeleton.

From the moment when he learned of the cowardly and treacherous intrigue contrived in order that his property might pass to her illegitimate child, he raised his head no more, he drained the cup of sorrow to the dregs. He drained it with a smile on his lips, in order not to give the lie to his theories, but poison always produces its effect; it consumed his vitals. His cough increased, so did the bloodstained expectorations. He passed whole nights without getting a wink of sleep. Everything presaged a speedy and fatal ending.

During these days an interesting crisis took place in the tortured mind of Father Gil. Mate-



rialism weighed upon his heart, like a sepulchral stone.

But within this sepulcher, the idealistic spirit of the priest moved to and fro incessantly, struggling in anguish to get out to the free air, and breathe a purer atmosphere. His eagerness to shake off the leprosy which was devouring him little by little, impelled him to study the systems of dogmatic metaphysics of the ancients and the moderns. It was a great joy for him that the bishop had appointed Father Narciso coadjutor. He had much more time at his disposal and a freer mind. He devoted himself once more to reading with feverish ardor. Before his astonished vision passed in procession all the grand conceptions of the human understanding, the sublime, colossal efforts carried out by man, for the purpose of obtaining a satisfactory explanation of the great problem of existence. He had some knowledge of many of them, but it was vague, incomplete and often false, since it proceeded from the quotations in the books which he had handled in the seminary. When he studied them now, at their fountain head, he felt himself possessed by a great admiration which resembled stupor. The grandeur, the marvelous perfection of some of these systems, seemed insurpassable, and fascinated his soul. At times, when he had just completed his examination of one of them, it seemed to him as though he had lifted the veil of truth forever. This learned and portentous stringing together of all partial truths, in order to obtain the totality of truth, satisfied the aspirations of his mind toward unity. Moreover,



these systems brought God back to him. They did not bring Him back as he could have wished, personal, provident, attentive to the prayers of men, but finally, at the end of all, they placed Him over the material universe, as its principle and its reason. We no longer wandered, like sad victims of shipwreck over the turbulent ocean of the physical forces; we had now something to which we could lift our eyes and our heart. Evil became evil once more, and good, good. And like a man of lucid mind he did not heed the superficial contradictions of these systems, which so greatly impress and disappoint the vulgar herd. He proceeded further and saw clearly, that beneath this apparent conflict the systems of modern idealistic philosophy exchanged fraternal kisses. All were saturated with the same pantheistic idealism. Penetrating still further, he observed that German philosophy shook hands with Greek philosophy across the desert of the Middle Ages.

Unfortunately, the last philosopher whom he read was Kant, who should have been the first. As he ran over the first pages of the "Critique of Pure Reason," he experienced the strange impression of a man who goes out to view a landscape, and whose legs fail him.

He has been accustomed not to think of the ground, and lo! it sinks from beneath him. In order to know things it is first necessary to ascertain whether we can know them. And the result which he gradually deduced from his reading was, that we can know only the appearance of things. Our knowledge, in its ultimate expression, consists of



nothing but perceptions, impressions, modifications of our own being. Then everything is a mere idea. Instinct obliged him to seek for solid land with eagerness; but the more he tried to raise his feet, the deeper he sank, after the manner of incautious persons who venture upon marshy soil. He rose suddenly, and tried to support himself upon those firmest of all notions, which have never failed the human understanding, the notions of time and space. The philosopher of Koenigsberg demonstrated, little by little, with inflexible logic, that space and time have no real existence, nor properties of such existence, but are merely forms of perception which concern the qualities of our mind, and not external reality. Then he anxiously sought support in the constant union of cause and effect. Kant forced him to see that this union is nothing but the uninterrupted chain of the changes which follow successively in time, that every effect is a change, and every cause the same. Hence, it is as absurd to think of a primal cause of things, as of the spot, where space terminates or the instant when time began.

A panic seized upon his soul, such as had never yet taken possession of it. Materialistic positivism had left him something; matter is a reality, so are its relations. Moreover, he had never yielded himself up to it, greatly as his mind had been agitated by very violent doubts. But now he was left alone, enveloped in utter obscurity, as regards the universe which surrounds us no less than as regards his own existence and destiny. Hence he battled, with the anguish of a man on the point of death, with the



desperation of the shipwrecked mariner who disputes with another the succor of a plank. He discussed the propositions of the book one by one. It was the combat of a child with an athlete. Each of the propositions had been considered at length in all its aspects, by the most profound thinker of the century, and also by the most prudent. What force could his feeble hands bring to bear on bastions fashioned with such care? His over-excited spirit imagined an argument; he jotted it down on the margin of the book; he thought it incontrovertible. On the following page it turned out that the philosopher had already taken it into account, and had dissolved it with a breath.

Sad and cruel struggle! In the frenzy of his wrath and terror, he delivered a hail of blows upon the breast of the old athlete. The latter remained motionless as a rock. Then, with derisive calm, he let fall his iron hand upon the priest's brow, and made him kiss the dust. He rose quickly, and attacked again, with more hardihood, and again he was stunned with a blow. He approached the end of the book. He felt that his strength was already exhausted. He desired, nevertheless, to essay one last effort against that oppressive logic, and rid himself of the bonds which imprisoned him. All was useless. The German Hercules caught him in his powerful arms, shook him a few times, as though he were made of straw, and wound up by hurling him violently to the ground.

He could no longer rise. When he awoke from his consternation he confessed to himself that he was



conquered. The world then offered itself to him clearly as his own idea. Everything which exists, exists only in thought. The philosopher of Koenigsberg did not wish to draw that deduction; but it was very clear; there was no other, given his terrible premises. The sun which lights us, the sea which roars at our feet, those worlds which people space, are but so many representatives of our thought. All we know of them is that there is an eye which sees them. The center of gravity of existence falls back upon the subject, and is a phenomenon of his brain. All this universe, so rich, so varied, all beings great and small, the stars as well as the insects, hold their existence suspended by a very slender thread, the thread of consciousness. The world preserves much resemblance to a dream, a chimera. And what do we know about that God, the creator of things, the father of men? We shall never know anything. From the moment when the world and the order of the world are pure phenomena determined by our intelligence, there is no reason for the existence of a Supreme Being. The hour had arrived to turn God out of doors, and to send Him off with all the honors due to a dethroned king.

Pallid, panting, his body exhausted with fatigue and his soul crushed with grief, Father Gil remained stretched out in his wretched armchair. A book lay open on his knees, his arms hung limply down, his eyes were closed. Tears began to trickle from between the interspaces of his eyelashes, and coursed tremulously and silently down his cheeks. He was the sad image of the conquered



man. Then his delicate body gave way, the features of his sweet and gentle countenance contracted, and a sob broke from his breast. He lifted his hands to his face, and wept disconsolately. "Nothing, nothing ! We shall never know anything."

His housekeeper, Da. Josefa was stupefied when she entered the room, and found him in this condition. The vicar raised his head and made haste to turn it aside, that the good woman might not perceive his state ; but it was too late.

"What? You are weeping, Señor Vicar? What has happened, my dear creature? Virgin of Solitude ! If you had father or brothers, I should think that some one of them was dead. I will wager that that busybody of a D. Narciso has been causing you some fresh displeasure. Despise him, D. Gil, despise him !"

"Oh, no ! Be on your guard against injustice, Da. Josefa!" the young man hastened to say. "No one has caused me any displeasure. These tears come from the nervous illness which I have been suffering from for several days."

"I told you so. You work too hard. Those blessed books, which I should like to see burned——"

Here Da. Josefa entered upon a long harangue, declaring herself in principle a disciple of the Caliph Omar. Father Gil stopped her before she had finished.

"What did you come to say to me, Da. Josefa?"

"Ah, I had forgotten ! Your godmother has sent a messenger to say that her brother is dying ;



that you are to go to him immediately, and take the holy oils with you."

"Jesus! God be with him! I did not think it would be so soon—Poor D. Álvaro!" he exclaimed rising briskly, and making haste to don his hat and cloak.

"Bah! A heretic, who never set foot in the church! What does it matter if he does die? The sooner the demons carry him off the better!"

The vicar cast a timid and anxious glance at her. He dared not protest against this barbarity; he feared lest she might penetrate his soul, and read his own sacrilegious doubts.

After passing by the church, and taking the holy oils, he entered the ancient palace of the Montesinos. The day was overcast. The rain fell sadly, with a pertinacity known only in that region of the Peninsula. Ramiro came to open the door, as usual. The old servant was overwhelmed. It seemed as though ten years had been added to his age in a few days. When he saw the priest, he caught him by the wrist with his tremulous hands, and exclaimed in a voice that was not his own:

"He is dying, D. Gil! He is dying!"

And a torrent of tears poured down his cheeks furrowed with wrinkles.

"Is it so serious?"

"He is dying! He is dying! She did it! She did it, yes!—But I will kill her—do you know? I will kill her—then they may kill me—they may throw me into the sea—I want to avenge my young master—I'll kill the sly fox, that I will!"



At the same time, the old man, without knowing what he was about, pressed the priest's wrist with such force that the latter restrained a cry of pain with difficulty.

"Calm, Ramiro, calm! Our business now is to attend to the sick man, and see if we can do anything to relieve him."

"Come upstairs with me, Señor Vicar. There is no hope—The doctor has said so—Poor dear young master!—I will kill her, I will kill her!"

In the vast, roughly paved courtyard, the rain produced a lugubrious sound. They ascended the dirty, decayed staircase, to the principal floor. Ramiro continued to weep, and to mutter threats. They ascended to the second story. The old man pushed open the door of his master's room, and the priest paused, impressed by the spectacle which presented itself to his sight. D. Álvaro Montesinos reclined rather than lay on his bed, with a pile of cushions behind his shoulders; he lay in a swoon, with his eyes closed and his mouth half open, his poor chest shaken from time to time by an ominous hiccough. There was no one with him but Da. Eloisa and a maid-servant. The latter was fanning him, and the sick man was instinctively trying to catch the resulting air. His face presented all the symptoms of death.

At the sound of the door, Da. Eloisa turned her face, bathed in tears, and made a sign that the priest should approach.

"He has lain in this fit for a quarter of an hour," she said in a faint voice. "He may re-



main in it—Will you administer Extreme Unction?”

Neither the ideas of the sick man, nor the chaos which reigned at that moment in his own brain, prompted him to do so. Nevertheless, Father Gil opened the case containing the oils automatically, and prepared to administer the last rites to his unhappy friend.

He was obliged to lift the bedclothes a little, in order that he might anoint his feet. Da. Eloisa and the maid turned aside; they retreated to a corner of the room and sobbed violently. The rain, at that moment, was beating a sad peal upon the leaded panes of the window. The dingy curtains, of ancient muslin, allowed a dim light to penetrate the alcove. Father Gil, with trembling hands, performed his pious office, while the last scion of the house of Montesinos lay unconscious, with the terrible pallor of death imprinted on his features. When he was on the point of finishing, the breast of the sick man grew somewhat calmer. A little later, he opened his eyes, and sent a glance of surprise, and even of terror, round the room. Then he closed his eyes once more. A moment later, he opened them, gazed fixedly at Father Gil, then directed his gaze at the Chrism, which the latter held in his hand, and his dying lips made an effort to relax into a smile.

“You have anointed me at last!” he said, in a barely audible voice. “You have done well. But this machine will go no longer, and however much oil you use on it——”



Father Gil cast an expressive glance at Da. Eloisa. The latter exclaimed in distress :

“Remember God, brother.”

“I remember him very well, my dear. I am very grateful to Him.”

Father Gil was anxious to avert a repulsive scene. He made a sign to Da. Eloisa and the maid that they should withdraw, as though he was about to proceed to confession. The women made haste to comply with the command, being eager, the sister in particular, that the dying man should make his peace with God.

“Although it is a long time since we have talked of religious subjects,” said Father Gil, seating himself at the foot of the bed and bending his head toward the heir, “I presume that your ideas have undergone no change since the last time that we discussed them. Nevertheless, in these moments when your life is in some danger, do you not feel the necessity of a faith that shall illuminate the darkness in which you may be enveloped, of some hope which may console you in this bitter peril?”

“None. I have happily arrived at the catastrophe of the horrible comedy. All men play in it a very far from successful part. Mine has been very melancholy.”

“It is true, D. Álvaro. You are one of the most unhappy men whom I have ever known. For that very reason, I believe either that there is no justice in heaven, or that you will there receive the reward for your sorrows if you repent at this time of your sins, and, also, of your antichristian ideas.”



Father Gil uttered these last words in a lower tone, as though ashamed of them.

"Neither in heaven nor on earth does that ridiculous justice which you assume exist. But there is something greater, and it is now on the point of being fulfilled."

"And are all the sorrows which you have suffered to remain fruitless? Have you not a right to believe in compensation?"

"No. I am profoundly guilty of the crime of having been born."

"This is horrible, D. Álvaro, and absurd besides. The sorrows of this world make us believe that it is a transitory world, a world of trial; that after this sad and bitter life, there is another, an eternal life, where our immortal soul will finally enjoy the purest felicity. You, who have suffered more than others, will enjoy a greater reward."

"Oh, no! I desire no rewards! I want no future life! I wish to rest—to rest eternally! How sweet is that word, father! Never more to feel the lashes of nature nor the stabs of men! Not to feel this miserable body which has caused me so much suffering! Not to feel the teeth of that infamous woman slowly gnawing away my heart! Listen, father. If you have even a little pity on me, do not try to deprive me of this last illusion. If you know that there is a heaven, hold your peace. I adjure you by all that you have loved in this world, do not disturb that blessed peace into which I am about to enter."



Father Gil, shaken by a qualm of sadness and compassion, began to weep.

"Thanks—thanks for these tears," said the sick man with a smile. At the same time, he laid his hand, as transparent as porcelain, on that of the priest, and pressed it gently.

A long and sad silence ensued. Father Gil meditated, with ecstatic gaze fastened on the window. The dying man, with closed eyes, seemed to be wooing the sweet slumber which he craved. The room was very dark at times, again it lightened, revealing the denseness of the clouds which intercepted the light of the sun.

"But do you feel no horror at nothingness, at absolute annihilation?" Father Gil exclaimed at length, with a certain violence, as though he were arguing against his own thought.

The heir of Montesinos opened his eyes in surprise.

"What? Do I not feel a fear of nothingness? Oh, no! What I fear is life. All wed it at birth, and it betrays everyone. Some say what I say. Others hold their tongues through shame."

"And what if God were to condemn you to eternal torments, after this life, for having blasphemed so?"

The dying man smiled, though with difficulty.

"You ecclesiastics have invented that, to disturb the peace of this hour, of this happy hour. But I have bought it at too high a price to part with it."

Another long silence ensued. The sick man closed his eyes again. Apart from a certain strange



agitation in his fingers, his tranquil attitude confirmed the sense of his words. He seemed to be enjoying with voluptuousness the insensibility which was, little by little, invading his being, the prelude of nothingness.

“And, nevertheless,” Father Gil said at length, with his eyes fixed on the window, “would not this hour be infinitely sweeter if it were the entrance into a new life, if a legion of angels were to descend for our soul, and bear it away, to enjoy God eternally, as the Christians believe?”

The heir raised his eyelids a little, and made a sign of negation with his head. Then he shut them again. But making an effort to sit up, at the expiration of a few minutes, he said in a firmer voice :

“It would be necessary, in order that I should enjoy life in the other world, that my whole body should be completely transformed. My character alone would suffice to weary me. Let me repose in peace. Let the fundamental error of my existence be destroyed, father. I should gain nothing by being perpetuated, neither would the Universe. Many other millions of beings charged with sustaining the burden of life remain here.”

“But it is horrible to enter into a night without bounds, an eternal night !”

“Not so. Life is a nightmare. Death is a tranquil sleep.”

He closed his eyes once more. Father Gil pressed his hand affectionately, exclaiming :

“Who knows !”



The dying man's hand quivered slightly. The vicar did not open his lips again. He bent his head upon his breast, and closed his eyes also, pressing them with the tips of his fingers, as though endeavoring to repress the torrent of thoughts which were escaping from his brain. The wind and rain had ceased. Nothing was audible in the chamber but the distant roar of the waves, dashing against the cliffs.

The priest's meditation was long and painful. The sharp, cold blade of scepticism penetrated his vitals: a cruel hand twisted it round, pitilessly, in order to rend them better. Perhaps that which this man, maddened with pain, had said, was not true? But was that true which Christianity affirmed? That, also, in the last resort, was also but an attempt to explain Existence and the Universe, more beautiful, more consolatory than the rest, no doubt, but a mere attempt, after all. We could have no certainty of it, since we have it not from our faculty for knowing things."

When, after a long time, he raised his head, the fright which he received made him start in his chair. D. Álvaro was at the last gasp. His mouth was open, and he inhaled the air in silence, but it did not suffice to move his shattered lungs.

"D. Álvaro! D. Álvaro!" he cried, shaking him.

There was no reply. Father Gil seized the fan, which lay on the night stand, and hastened to give him air. At the same time, he shouted:

"Godmother! godmother! Come!"

Da. Eloisa and the maid rushed into the chamber.



In vain did they try to resuscitate the dying man, fanning him, placing him upright, opening the window, doing everything which suggested itself to them at the moment. It was the last attack. He opened his mouth from time to time. He moved his fingers, in slight jerks. But his face continued to grow rapidly motionless. The man was being transformed into the statue; his soul was being converted into stone.

He drew three or four consecutive breaths and remained motionless, rigid, with his eyes and mouth half open.

Da. Eloisa embraced him, sobbing, and covered his cadaverous face with kisses. The maid began to scream as though she were beaten. Father Gil dropped on his knees, and began to read his breviary, in a low voice.

After a while, Da. Eloisa and the maid knelt also at the foot of the bed, and prayed. But the former, seeing a tear hanging beneath her brother's lashes, rose quickly and caught it in her handkerchief. It was the tear shed by those who have just died; the tear of protest of the creature against the harsh power which has drawn it from nothingness, without asking it.

"See, father, what peace, what sweet tranquillity his countenance breathes forth!" exclaimed the good woman, contemplating her brother with eyes full of grief and tenderness. "It is plainly to be seen that he made his peace with God at the end!"

The priest dropped his breviary on the bed, and covered his face with his hands.



## XII.

OBDULIA announced to her confessor that she was resolved to leave the world, and consecrate herself wholly to God in a convent. She could not have told him more agreeable news. For some time past, her marks of preference, the exaggerated submission and even idolatry which the young woman had taken a delight in showing him, had made Father Gil uneasy. The last extravagance which she had committed, and of which he had been informed by the bishop's secretary, had put him in such a state of confusion and annoyance that for many days he would not speak to her, and could not even reconcile himself to confessing her. The affair had become known, and excited much comment and no less laughter. It was clear that the person who lost most by it was she; but the dignity of the priest was also diminished by reflection. The young woman was put to shame. She did not present herself in public, nor in the houses of her friends, and she even contrived to go to church at hours when no one was there. But she was still more afflicted by the attitude of her confessor than ashamed. Perhaps it was for that reason, and to insinuate herself once more into his favor, that she went one evening to notify him, in the confessional, of the step which she had decided upon.



He gave his consent. So exalted a devotion, so lively a craving for penance and sacrifice were more to his taste inside the walls of a convent than in the midst of the impurities of mundane life. To tell the truth, it had always been a source of some surprise to him that his penitent had not settled upon the monastic life, which conformed so well to her inclinations. Then the age at which she had arrived, her first youth being past, gave no occasion to fear that her resolution was the offspring of an ephemeral fancy, of a fugitive, romantic enthusiasm, such as often occurs with young girls between the ages of fifteen and twenty years. Not only, then, did he announce his consent, but he encouraged her, in gentle words, to persist in it, and to put it into execution as speedily as possible. In the first place it was agreed between them that they should seek the best means for doing so. Father Gil, although he did not clearly confess as much to himself, was very thoroughly content to get rid of this uneasy and vexatious pious person, who annoyed him at all hours, and who might compromise him seriously some day when he was least expecting it.

They discussed the question of the convent. Father Gil desired that she should go to that of the Augustines, in Lancia, but the young woman preferred a stricter rule. In a little hamlet of Castile, called Astudillo, there existed a convent of Barefooted Carmelites, where a cousin of hers was the superior. It was a sweet, remote retreat; there were not more than ten or a dozen nuns: a real little corner of heaven, as a certain priest who had



visited it had informed her. She insisted on going thither, and her confessor finally found no remedy but to yield.

A more serious question remained: the permission of her father, Obdulia represented it, from the outset, as very difficult to obtain. Osuna had no other daughter. It was probable that he would resent the loss of her forever. She showed herself stubborn, afraid of speaking to him; day after day passed without her attempting it. Father Gil encouraged her, representing to her that what she was about to ask was in no way reprehensible. The resolution to retire from the world was good and pious in the eyes of the Church. Indifferent for those who did not believe in it, there was nothing immoral about it; it depended wholly on the taste or vocation of the person. If a father consents to one daughter's marrying, or choosing a career in accordance with her tastes, why should he not permit another to seek her happiness in the silence of the cell? Above all, there was nothing offensive to his authority contained in the humble request. If he refused, they would allege reasons; perhaps they might succeed in convincing him.

Finally, after much going and coming, attempts, fears, and vacillations, which encircled the enthusiastic damsel with a grand pomp and mystery, she one day decided to attack this alarming enterprise. Holy Heaven, in what a state of confusion and terror did she reach the confessional that evening! Her father had flown into a mad rage at the mere announcement of what she desired to do. He had



not been willing to listen to reason ; he had scolded her, used evil language to her, and thrust her out of his room with blows. He would rather see her dead, or slay her with his own hand. Father Gil considered this opposition exaggerated and even irrational, and proposed to appeal to Osuna himself, and make him understand that he had no right to do violence in this manner to the inclinations of his daughter, above all, taking into consideration that she was not a child lacking in reflection. Obdulia hastened to dissuade him from this undertaking. Her father had said, in a fit of passion, that he should regard as his enemy any person who spoke to him on the subject, that he would not listen to him, and that he would eject him from his house.

He was obliged to yield for the time being, and await a more propitious opportunity. Nevertheless, the pious young woman every day manifested greater and more vehement desires to abandon the world forever. This reconciled her with Father Gil, who had begun to hold her in small esteem. Several times, after her first attempt, she had attacked her father, but always in vain and unsuccessfully. Osuna offered more violent opposition on each occasion. As soon as he learned his daughter's intention, he showed himself sullen with her, and treated her with extraordinary harshness ; on all occasions, but especially at the dinner hour, he ridiculed her devoutness, and took a delight in tormenting her with cruel jests which made her weep. And not in words alone, but with deeds did he torture her pitilessly. She declared that her arms were black with the



pinches which he inflicted upon her as soon as the question of the convent was broached. One day she showed her confessor how one of her ears had been torn by a tweak from the ferocious hunchback; on another day she came with her cheeks swollen and blackened through his having thrown a clothes brush in her face. Father Gil was horrified and confounded. He knew not what to do or what to advise.

The ill-usage and the violence of the scenes which she endured from her father every hour reached such an extreme that one day she declared to her confessor that she was resolved to bear with them no longer. She meant to enter the convent, in spite of all obstacles which might present themselves. If Father Gil would assist her in her undertaking, she would escape from her father's house, and enter immediately into that of God. He was alarmed and confused by such a rash resolve. He could not conceal from himself the fact that the young woman had powerful reasons for disobeying her father's authority, and, if you like, for fleeing from it. But it was a very serious case. He immediately sought to dissuade her, counseling calm and resignation. Perhaps Osuna would become convinced, in time; God would touch his heart, and that which she so earnestly longed for might be accomplished with his consent.

Obdulia would not listen to him. She had already suffered too much. God could not wish that she should obey a tyrannical and cruel father, who was himself disobeying the divine law by placing



obstacles in the way of his daughter's salvation. With many tears and excessive gestures, she besought him to succor her in this strait, and that he would conduct her to the convent of Astudillo. The priest flatly refused. Again he advised her to be calm, and to still seek, by the gentle means of obedience and humility, to win her father's consent. But Obdulia, driven to desperation by the latter's increasing rigor, finally told him, in a conclusive manner, that if, in the space of a week, he had not made up his mind to accompany her to the convent, she would make her escape from the house and go alone.

These words threw the mind of the young vicar into a state of great perturbation. It was repugnant to him to aid so directly in committing a disobedience. But to consent that a father should abuse his authority in so barbarous a manner, should do violence to the inclination of his daughter and go contrary to the will of God, who was calling her to Him, did not appear to him good either. For several days these opposing tendencies did battle within him. Obdulia saw that he was preoccupied, irresolute. She continued astutely to draw him toward the decision which she desired, by giving him to understand, each time with more force, that, if he refused to accompany her, she would set off alone. This appeared to the vicar the height of scandal. Besides, she would expose herself to a thousand lamentable accidents, and perhaps to her utter perdition. To consent to it was to burden his conscience with a terrible responsibility. He thought



of warning her father ; but the young woman divined his intention, and declared to him, firmly, that this step would be useless and injurious for all parties. As soon as she found a moment free in which to make her escape, she would do so, were it at midnight.

Father Gil had the weakness to yield. With the lively imagination which characterized her, Osuna's daughter set to devising the means for putting her project into execution. It was a peculiarity of her constitution, that she could never do things by natural and simple means. In order that it should turn out to her taste, everything must be involved, strange, violent. The plan was as follows: Father Gil was to go one morning to Lancia, hire a carriage, and return with it at night. He was to leave it in the vicinity of the town, and go home to sleep. Very early in the morning, before dawn, she would come out, under pretext of going to mass, take the highway to Lancia, and they would meet at a place designated beforehand ; they would enter the carriage and drive to take the train for Castile, at a station beyond Lancia, in order to throw her father off the track if he should chance to take it into his head to follow her. This project did not commend itself to the vicar ; it inspired him with a profound and instinctive repugnance. He made several objections, but the young woman promptly disposed of them with her fertile and acute intelligence. She made him see that any other plan would present more serious inconveniences ; she artfully palliated the points which were most likely to shock



her confessor; she stupefied him with her volubility, The weak and kindly character of Father Gil could not resist these attacks, and he finally agreed to put in practice that which his penitent had devised.

One Monday in the month of April, our vicar set off in the coach for Lancia, under pretext of going to consult a medical friend on the subject of his indisposition. Shortly afterward, Obdulia presented herself in his house. They had informed Da. Josefa of everything. The housekeeper liked this plan no better than did the vicar, and in her own mind she called the pious woman "a busybody and tricky," but such was the delight which she felt at the prospect of getting rid of her, that she held her tongue and overlooked everything. There had always existed between the two a rivalry, which it was easy to explain. Obdulia, with an excuse or without one, had been in the habit of visiting her confessor, watching over his domestic welfare, sometimes putting his clothes in order, at others sending him some dish which he liked, and so on. This enraged Da. Josefa in an indescribable manner. She hated her like death. She said vexatious things about her everywhere, and, with the object of doing her harm, she had several times been on the point of compromising her master. Accordingly, it is not strange that, while perceiving the full absurdity and danger of the escapade, she should have favored it, egging on Father Gil, dissipating his scruples. In it she beheld only a means of ridding herself forever of that insufferable excrescence which had fastened itself upon her. The first thing that the young woman



did was to ask the housekeeper for a small valise in which to pack the linen which her confessor would require on the journey. Da. Josefa fetched a traveling bag from the garret.

"That is very small, señora. It will hold nothing."

"How is it small? asked the housekeeper in astonishment. "It will hold enough clothes for several days. How long is the Señor Vicar going to remain yonder?"

"A short time, only a short time," she made haste to reply, with manifest perturbation, flushing scarlet. "But you see, on journeys, no one knows what may happen. At best, the diligence or the horses may be lacking. An illness. Who knows?"

"God bless you, señorita, don't begin to think of such things. I'll go for another. You shall not be stopped by the lack of a valise."

Between them, they packed into it several changes of linen, shoes, combs, the breviary, and so forth, and so forth. When they had completed their task, which was certainly neither long nor difficult, Obdulia seated herself in the priest's armchair, declaring that she was extremely fatigued, that she had hardly slept the preceding night with the anxiety which such a decisive resolution always occasions, and that perhaps she might be able to get a nap. Da. Josefa left her to repose in peace, and went off to attend to her duties.

When Obdulia heard her fidgiting about below stairs, she rose and began to examine all the objects in the room with a merry glance. She touched



everything with her hands. Particularly those of the most intimate and personal use of her confessor, such as the combs, the pens, the matches, and so on, were the objects of her anxious attention; she turned them about in her hands with emotion, while a tender and submissive smile flitted across her lips. A well worn band lay upon a chair. She paused before it, picked it up, and contemplated it for several moments with interest; then, casting a timid glance at the door, she raised it to her lips two or three times, and left it where she had found it. She remained standing for several minutes in the middle of the room, with her eyes fixed on space, carried away by intense meditation. Her cheeks were rosy, her eyes brilliant; a humble, shamefaced smile transfigured her faded face, lending it a candid and virginal suavity which it had never possessed. If she was ever beautiful at any moment of her life, it was at this moment.

An hour later, she quitted the room; she took leave of Da. Josefa and went home.

Father Gil arrived at twilight; he saw her, and they agreed to set off at dawn, before daylight, and enter the carriage which he had left in the vicinity. Da. Josefa sent the valises, while it was still night, by her nephew, to a certain poor inn, not far from Peñascosa.

A long while before the light of dawn was visible, Obdulia knocked discreetly at her confessor's door. Da. Josefa came to open it. Father Gil was ready. They drank their chocolate hastily, and after kissing Da. Josefa effusively, the nun-elect passed through



the door and glided rapidly down the street. Ten minutes later, Father Gil sallied forth. The night was rather damp and dark. Considerable rain had fallen. The street was full of puddles; the highway of mire. When she reached the suburbs, Obdulia waited for her confessor, and together they directed their steps to the wretched inn, where the carriage was waiting. On their way thither, they exchanged not a single word. Father Gil walked on, silent, taciturn, plainly exhibiting a bad humor which was not of frequent occurrence with him. The coachman took some time to harness. While this operation was in progress, the future nun entered the inn. Father Gil remained outside, looking on. Both were objects of great curiosity to the landlady, to her children, to the shepherd, and the stable-boy. These people hardly took their eyes off them. The young priest observed that they exchanged various expressive and jeering glances, which put him to shame. He suddenly perceived the falseness of his situation, the enormous folly which he had committed. Any other man with more character would have beaten a retreat on the instant. He felt greatly inclined to do it, and hesitated as to whether he should tell the young woman that it was impossible for him to accompany her; finally, he dared not, and when the coachman informed him that all was in readiness, and Obdulia said to him, with her customary vivacity: "Come, father; quick, in with you!" he entered the carriage with the resignation of a lamb.

Day had begun to dawn. The horizon cleared,



and a damp, warm wind, peculiar to spring, and the season of storms, began to blow. The carriage rolled along the highway, and made the mud fly in clouds. It was an old carriage which must have once belonged to a private person. Obdulia placed herself on the back seat, and Father Gil took the front seat, as far away as possible. He continued to be serious and taciturn, even more so than before. The young woman watched him out of the corner of her eye, and divining what was passing in his mind, remained silent as well, in a state of abstraction from worldly concerns which should give a good show of her mystic thoughts. In order to aid in this, she said, after a silence of half an hour :

“Father, we have not asked San José to protect us on our journey.”

“That is true,” replied the priest, whose clear blue eyes were roaming abstractedly over the landscape, which was beginning to unmuffle itself from the dark mantle of night, and to emerge fresh, beautiful and dripping from its prolonged bath.

“Would you like that we should recite five ‘Our Fathers’ together?”

The priest removed his hat in silence, and began, in a low voice, to repeat a paternoster. Obdulia replied to him with genuine emotion, also in a low voice. The two voices formed a sweet, discreet murmur, which filled the soul of the young woman with emotion, she knew not why. She felt herself possessed by a strange languor, by an intimate felicity, which annihilated her mind or lulled it to slumber. The dull sound of the wheels of the car-



riage, and the jingling of the mules, contributed to submerge her in this ecstatic rapture. When they had finished, she remained for a long time absorbed in herself. If she had had her way, that prayer would never have come to an end.

But the young priest had put on his hat, and was once more staring through the window. The landscape grew animated under the rosy light of dawn. The wind had swept the heavy clouds to the west, and had left in the east a break through which the disk of the sun rose in splendor. This sight separated him from the miserable anxiety which occupied his mind. A shiver seized upon him and again he fell to meditating upon the terrible fixed idea which for several days had been gnawing at his heart. Again he felt that oppressive anguish which swelled his breast, little by little, and threatened to suffocate him. Obdulia and everything around him ceased to exist. Nothing in all the universe remained, except his thought in face of the grand problem of knowledge.

Obdulia watched him attentively, but dared not, for a long time, disturb his ecstasy. She thought he was rendered taciturn by what she had read in in his eyes recently, concern at having placed himself in a false position. Nevertheless, she ended by speaking to him, and she adopted a jocose tone. She desired to distract his thoughts at any cost.

"You are very pensive, father. Are you hungry?"

The priest made an effort to smile.

"No."



"Yes, you are: don't deny it. And hunger makes us think such sad things. You shall see how I will rid you in one little moment of that vinegar face, and put in sherry amontillado. Here I have it in this flask."

So saying, she opened a little leather bag which she carried in her hand, and began to take out food and two or three bottles of wine and milk.

"I must see you with an Easter face, father," she continued, as she removed the white papers in which she had wrapped slices of meat, fish patties, and so forth. "When I see you with this wrinkle here—here," and she touched his brow with her finger: the priest drew back hastily—"you make me sadder than the night. Why shall it be? Why shall it not be? You who know so much, shall tell me."

She uttered the last words in a sing-song tone, and with affected abstraction.

"Well, then! I am going to set the table. Hold your legs very, very still, for I need them at this moment."

She placed her knees against those of the priest, spread a napkin upon them, and set the viands in place. The flasks of wine she placed on the floor.

It seems to me that there is no necessity for getting the forks out, is there? We will be humble. Let us eat with our fingers."

"Is it humility, or is it because it tastes better so?" asked Father Gil, with a smile. Obdulia broke into a laugh.

"You are my confessor, I cannot tell you a lie.



It suits me much better. It is one of the few dirty things which pleases me."

"That is not humility either," said the confessor, still smiling.

"Come, come, don't snarl at me, and eat gracefully—that is, if you know how—for I see that you do not. But, my dear creature! What are you doing—taking mouthfuls of that bit of pollock without removing the spines? Don't you see that one may stick fast in your throat? Give it here—" and she snatched it from his hands as she spoke. "You shall see how I will strip them all off, so that not one shall remain. I mean—that is, if my fingers will not disgust you."

Father Gil hastened to make signs in the negative.

"They are just out of my gloves. Besides," she exclaimed with a laugh, "you are very fond of me, and it will taste the better to you for having passed through my hands. What a silly thing I am! Am I not, father?" she added, lowering her voice.

"Silly, no. Rather giddy, yes," replied the priest, accompanying the words with a smile, in order to deprive them of their harshness.

The young woman flushed scarlet. The conversation became more serious.

About nine o'clock, they described the towers of Lancia, and the great black curtain of mountains which shut in the horizon. The sky was clear. A warm wind blew from the south. The morning presented that exquisite mildness which is observable in some spring days.



Father Gil ordered the coachman to pass near the town, without entering, and drive to the first station on the railway, distant from it about one league. He had decided to take the train there, by way of greater precaution. The station was called La Reguera—the Canal. It was eleven o'clock when they arrived. They must wait two hours and a half, since the train did not pass until twenty minutes of two.

La Reguera was situated at the extremity of a picturesque and smiling valley. From the station, which stood on a lofty terrace, it was all perfectly visible. It was encircled by a girdle of gently swelling hills, clothed in trees and meadows, and behind these by another girdle of bare and lofty mountains, whose reddish hues formed a beautiful contrast with the green of spring. In the plain there was a most capricious mosaic of meadows with boundary lines of hazel-nut trees, fields of maize and groves. Through its center flowed majestically a broad crystalline river, which, irradiated by the sun, seemed a great, glittering band of silver. As soon as they had dismissed the coachman, Obdulia proposed to her confessor that they should descend to the plain and there await the arrival of the train. He accepted in anguish, for the sake of escaping the glances of the people at the station. They descended by a steep, narrow path, and entered a grove of chestnut trees which extended to the brink of the river. The priest observed that it was very damp, but the young woman walked forward uttering cries of delight, striding into the grass up



to her knees, clapping her hands like a child let out of school. The great crests of the chestnut trees were not yet clothed with the foliage which they display in summer. The rays of the sun, passing athwart their bare branches, drank up the fresh water which formed pools at their feet among the turf.

Obdulia did not pause until she had reached the pebbly slope which served as margin to the river. There she came to a halt, turned her face round, and gazed with smiling mien at her confessor, who was advancing with precaution, placing his feet carefully on the dryest spots. Her face was flushed with running, her hair ruffled, and her great black eyes sparkled with an expression of genuine pleasure.

“Come on, coward ! Are you afraid to wet your feet ?”

“And if you catch a catarrh, how will you be able to withstand the hard life during the year of your noviciate ?” replied the priest, approaching.

A cloud passed over the eyes of the young woman, and she suddenly became serious. Then, making an effort to be animated, she said :

“Why do not you venture to unfasten this boat, that we may take a row upon the river ?”

“No, indeed.”

“Then I will. You shall see.”

A large, decrepit old bark, which served to transport the peasants from one shore to the other on market days, lay fastened to the shore by a chain, under some rushes on the marshy ground which overhung it.



“Ay, what a pity!” exclaimed the godly young woman, grasping the chain in her hands. “It is fastened with a padlock!”

“I am glad of it. It will prevent your committing a piece of folly.”

“But I do not renounce my idea of floating a little. I shall get into it. I come from a seaport and the water is my element.”

No sooner said than done. She leaped with decision into the bark, which inclined to one side to receive her; she stepped across the benches to the stern, and seated herself there.

“Oh! how pleasant it is here, in the shade! And it rocks a little too. Come, father. You can hope for nothing better anywhere.”

The priest also leaped over the two benches, and seated himself not far from her. The shade was really grateful at that midday hour. The current rocked the boat gently, and produced as it splashed against it a soft and crystalline lapping which invited to slumber. After congratulating themselves on their good fortune in finding so agreeable a seat, and exchanging a few phrases, both relapsed into silence. Obdulia bent her body over the water, and fixed her eyes upon it with a melancholy expression. Father Gil allowed his to rove over the horizon, glancing, without seeing them, along the line of lofty mountains which isolated the valley from the rest of the world. And, as was always the case when he remained abstracted for a moment, that fatal doubt began to float before his mind again.



What was all this which lay around him? A pure representation of his thought, a product of himself, a dream perhaps—a dream! While we are asleep we also see, we touch and feel, exactly as when we are awake. Why should life not be a long dream? The difference which Kant establishes between sleeping and waking seemed to him fragile. For the concatenation of appearance exists in the one the same as in the other. The only thing which breaks this chain of appearances is the act of waking. But many times, on awakening, we confound the things which have happened in our dreams with the things of reality. Does not this indicate with sufficient clearness that everything has the same origin and foundation? What reason have we for saying that the latter are real, and that the others are not?

He was drawn from his intense meditation by the voice of Obdulia, who had been watching him for several minutes.

“Come, father: think no more of that and tell me truly whether it is not to your taste here?”

“Of what is it that I am not to think, my daughter?” replied the priest, flushing slightly, as though he had been found out.

“Of that! I do not know what it is, but it must be something bad when it makes you wrinkle your brow and open your eyes wide in terror, as though you beheld a spirit from the other world before you. Come, think of me a little, seeing that I have committed myself to your care.”

“I do think of you. Have I not just warned you



not to wet your feet? But you pay no heed," he replied, with a kindly smile.

"That is it! You remember me only to scold me. You have become a very great grumbler, father! Formerly, you used to be more cowardly, more gentle; you used so many circumlocutions in everything you said, for fear of offending one. But now! never mind, you never beat round the bush at all! You have learned thoroughly how to scold. Of course," she added, changing her tone and drawing nearer to him, "this manner pleases me more. I like to have my confessor keep a firm hand on the bridle, to have him severe and hard with me. You reprove me but little, father. I should be glad to have you more severe, to have you chastise me vigorously, and even beat me, that I might prove to you well my submission."

She uttered the last words in a trembling voice and with a shamefaced look, riveting on her confessor a gaze of timid adoration. His face expressed perturbation and disgust. He turned his face away and preserved silence.

At the expiration of a few minutes, the godly young woman, who was staring at the water in a melancholy way, said with repressed impulsiveness:

"What would I not give if the chain which holds this boat would only break and the current would carry me away, far, very far away! where I should see nothing which I have seen hitherto, where everything which I imagine should be realized on the instant. Ah! I should like to



halt in a valley smaller than this one, but more smiling also; the sky always blue, the earth covered with flowers and beautiful animals who would come to feed from my hand. And to live there alone with God and the persons whom I should choose to accompany me. To live amid the fields and to hear what the trees say when the wind agitates their crests, and what the fountains murmur, and what the birds warble, and what the insects hum. To walk about always escorted by a guard of God's little birds, who should sing to us and show us the road, and delight us with their singing, intoxicated by the perfume of the flowers, inundated with light, wrapped in the caress of an eternal spring. That is what I used to dream when I was fourteen years old. And to-day, without knowing why, I have begun to dream it once more. But no," she added, in a deep voice, after a pause, knitting her pallid brow vigorously, "it would be better if the bark were to bear me to some obscure grotto amid inaccessible cliffs, and there upset and bury me in its black waves, so that nothing more might ever be heard of me. In that way, my sufferings would cease at once."

As she uttered the last words, she raised her hands to her face, and began to sob.

Father Gil gazed at her for a moment, with stern eyes.

"What you have just said is a great impiety, and the greater and more abominable because it comes from a mouth which is so soon to pronounce sacred vows."



"Pardon me, father. These are dreams, nothing more."

"Ask pardon of God, and prepare yourself in a more respectful manner to become his bride."

As Father Gil said this gravely, he rose and quitted the boat. Obdulia followed him, her handkerchief pressed to her eyes.

They ascended once more to the station. They took some broth in a neighboring wine and provision shop, and waited for the arrival of the train, which was not long in coming. There was no vacant carriage, but in one there was only one person, and they entered it. The train started again instantly. The traveler glanced at them in an absent-minded way, with but little curiosity, probably imagining that they were brother and sister. But after a few moments, the young woman asked her confessor to take her valise down from the netting, that she might get out a handkerchief. The traveler observed that they addressed each other as "you" ceremoniously, and then examined them with eager attention. Father Gil became perturbed beneath his fixed, inquisitive gaze. Fortunately, the man got out at the third station. But he still watched them, from his post on the sidewalk, wounding them with his eyes until the train started.

Both maintained an obstinate silence. Father Gil no longer felt himself carried away by metaphysics; he began to be tormented by an indefinable sense of uneasiness, which filled his soul with tremors and vague presentiments. He was conscious of a singular shame since the traveler who had alighted had



observed them with such persistency. This girl inspired him with alarm. A throng of evil, mad thoughts rushed to his brain, and filled it with confusion. His cheeks were inflamed, his eyes terrified. He tried to avoid meeting the eyes of his penitent, which he felt resting constantly upon him.

There came a moment when, through irresistible attraction or by chance, their glances met. The young woman indulged in a slight, malicious smile. The priest promptly removed his eyes, and remained grave, as though he had not perceived her. After a while, their eyes met again, they knew not how, and again the devout young woman broke into a laugh, as she gazed merrily at him. Father Gil paid no heed to her, and turned his face toward the window. But Obdulia exclaimed :

“Don’t you know, father, what I am laughing at?”

“You may tell me,” the priest replied gravely, without turning his head.

“At you.”

“Why?” he replied, naturally and modestly.

“Because I divine perfectly what you are thinking about. You are afraid of the coming of night, like children. You are beginning to be violent with a woman who is not yet old, and you repent of having consented to accompany me.”

“You are not very far from the truth,” replied the priest firmly.

Obdulia was a little abashed; but she immediately retorted :

“That is a proof of your great modesty, father,



A holy man like you need fear nothing in any situation. I, without being a saint, am perfectly tranquil."

These words pleased Father Gil. He replied kindly, and, becoming a little more serene and confident, he entered into conversation with her again, trying to appear familiar and jocose, the more so as he desired to remove the sense of discomfort and disquiet which hovered over them.

They said the Angelus together. Then they supped on the provisions which they had with them. During supper, Obdulia was merry and opportune in her conversation. The priest followed her humor with a certain affectation, to conceal the embarrassment which weighed upon him, in spite of himself.

Night had closed in, a superb Castillian night, cold and azure, lighted by the rays of the moon, which transformed the plain into a vast, sleeping lake. The train was running at full speed through the middle of it, disturbing the enchantment of that sweet and tranquil splendor with its strident whistles and the rumble of its progress. The tall poplar trees seemed to float above the plain like ghosts enveloped in the white crape of the mist.

At length the windows of the carriage became covered with steam. Obdulia separated from her confessor and coiled herself up in a corner, shivering with cold. Then she began to make sketches on the pane with her finger. She wrote her name, Obdulia Osuna; then that of her confessor, Gil Lastra. And returning to her corner, she nestled



down in it again. Father Gil, who had read the two names clearly from his seat, approached the window, under the pretext of stretching his legs, and wrote beneath his, in plain letters : "priest." An interval of silence intervened, both appeared to be dozing. At last Obdulia said ; "With your permission, I shall go to bed for a while, father. I am sleepy."

And she stretched herself out on the cushions, throwing a cloak across her limbs.

"Ay ! Ay !" she cried, after the lapse of a few minutes. "How my shoes hurt me ! Evidently, I got them wet first, and then placed them over the heater, and they have shrunk ! Come, father," she added, with a gracious smile, "serve as my maid, for once. Take them off, for I cannot."

A flood of crimson rushed to the cheeks of the priest. He hesitated for a moment. "Come, father," she persisted, "be humble, like all the saints. The Pope washes the feet of the poor ; you may well remove my shoes."

Father Gil rose, and, red as a poppy, began with trembling hand to take off the shoes of his spiritual daughter. She watched him with a malicious smile.

"Many thanks, father. Now do me the favor to wrap my legs up in the cloak. So ; that's perfect. Now lie down a while yourself, and make no noise."

The priest replied to all this with a forced smile, settled himself in the opposite corner, and suddenly became very grave and frowned violently. A terrible uneasiness took possession of his mind. The es-



capade continued to appear to him as a piece of giddiness, which he found more and more unpardonable. That woman had neither a true vocation for the life of a nun, nor did she show any signs of ever having it. Hers was a frivolous, malicious, violent temperament, which was capable of any atrocity. What folly to have yielded to her importunity! He confessed that he deserved, in some small degree, that which he was enduring, for his zeal in getting rid of her at any cost. But as there was no longer time to turn back, the important point was to leave her in the convent as soon as possible, and to this he would direct all his energies. Obdulia appeared to be sleeping. But her eyes opened, from time to time, to take a look, and emitted a sudden blaze, which was both jeering and mischievous.

They reached Palencia at nine o'clock. They had themselves conducted to a modest inn. Before they retired, each to his own chamber, Father Gil wished to arrange all that was necessary for undertaking the trip to Astudillo on the following day. He ordered horses to be engaged, he informed himself as to the road which they must take, of the time which they would be delayed, and so forth. He wished to leave everything in readiness, in spite of Obdulia's hinting to him that there was no such haste. As it was a question of only a short journey, it was easy to regulate everything for the morrow. But the vicar could not conceal his anxiety to have done with this business.

He rose very early, but dared not give the young woman notice. He allayed his impatience by



prayer, by pacing his chamber, by going to the man of whom he had hired the horses, to make sure that they were in readiness. Finally, about ten o'clock, he ventured to send a message by the maid, to inquire whether Obdulia were ready to set out. The reply which the woman brought back was that the young lady was not yet risen, because she had caught a little cold, but that when she did rise, she would let him know so that they might set out on their journey.

This news afflicted Father Gil greatly, though he could not say why: he felt a profound disgust, and a presentiment of catastrophe. An hour later he received another message from her, advising him to breakfast alone, and afterward to come to her chamber, since she would then be dressed and ready. He did so, growing more and more uneasy every moment, and more oppressed with a sense of coming misfortune. When he entered the young woman's room he found her really risen, but by no means disposed to depart. She was dressed in an elegant morning gown, and her hair was caught up in a white net, with bows of crimson silk. She was tolerably pale, and her eyes showed signs of her having wept.

Father Gil halted at the door and knitted his brows.

"Enter, father, and sit down here in this arm-chair," she said from her low chair, gazing sweetly at him. "I am well. I have passed a very bad night."

"Have you coughed?" asked the vicar, seating himself.



"No. I spent the whole time in weeping."

The priest stared at her in stupefaction.

"How is that, my daughter?"

Obdulia raised her handkerchief to her eyes and made no answer. After a long silence, she dropped her handkerchief, grasped her confessor's hand, kissed it repeatedly with effusion, and moistened it with tears, exclaiming:

"I am very unhappy."

Father Gil tried to withdraw his hand, but the pious young woman clung the more closely to it.

"No, do not take your hand from me, father: that hand which has so often absolved me from my sins, and which now, alas! can neither absolve me or drag me from the abyss into which I have fallen."

"Calm yourself, daughter," replied the priest, who was impressed. "Perhaps you repent of your decision! That does not signify that you have fallen into the abyss. Everything can be arranged without scandal. You have a year's novitiate, in which you can leave the convent whenever you desire it."

Obdulia covered her face with her hands once more, and said between her sobs:

"It is not that. It is something worse. I have a secret, father; a secret which has weighed upon my heart for a long time, and which is suffocating me."

Father Gil remained in suspense for a few moments, then he said:

"If you desire it, we will go to the church and I will hear your confession."



“No, no. You can no longer be my confessor.” And raising her brow abruptly, with pallid cheeks and dry and brilliant eyes, in which a desperate resolution was depicted, she continued “I know very well, father, that I am destined to weep all my life long. I know, also, that, after this life, an eternity of torment probably awaits me. But despair takes no account of torments, and fears nothing. It has but one thought. All the rest is annihilated. I have deceived you, father. I do not wish to be, nor can I be, the bride of Jesus Christ, because I should be unfaithful to my vows. I cherish in my soul, in its most hidden and sacred recess, a love to which I shall be faithful all my life. That love is my delight and my torment. For two years I have lived dying all the while a sweet death, for I adore my own sufferings. For two years I have wept in silence, but my tears are sweet, and I drink them with pleasure. Without being aware of it, father, you have been slowly poisoning me ; but far from abhorring you, I love you. I adore you with all my soul. I have tried to tear from my heart that love which is consuming me. I have beaten my breast, I have martyred my flesh. You know it well, father. Then I became convinced that it was useless, and I allowed it to flourish in my heart. The will of God be done. I know that I am condemned, but I love you. I love thee ! I love thee more than my salvation ! Take me away whither thou wilt, but do not separate me from thee. Let me be thy servant. Let me kiss the ground on which thou treadest.”



She fell on her knees in front of her counselor, with her face buried in her hands.

The vivid crimson with which it was flooded was visible between her slender fingers. Father Gil sprang abruptly to his feet, pallid as a dead man, with terror depicted in his eyes. His lips trembled, without doubt on the point of thundering forth some very harsh phrase, but he did not succeed in giving it utterance.

He heard a noise at the door. He turned his head in dismay, and a stifled cry of shame burst from his throat. At the door stood Osuna, D. Martín de las Casas and D. Peregrín Casanova.

"Here are the turtle doves!" shouted D. Martín, in a stentorian voice.

Father Gil retreated, with terrified eyes.

"What is this? What is going on? My daughter! Good Heavens!" exclaimed Osuna, hastening to assure himself of her identity.

"Listen, you dirty, crop-eared brute!" ejaculated D. Peregrín, addressing the vicar. "What sort of a situation is this for a priest? Do not you blush with shame?"

D. Martín de las Casas seized him by the arm with his left hand and, thrusting him against the wall, broke forth into injurious expressions, in a pompous voice, brandishing his cudgel the while.

"Measly beast! A pretty position you have left these people in, who raised you from the dust! Miserable maggot, I ought to crush you flat and fling you into the street like a mass of skin with a little flesh for the dogs to eat! You ought to be



nailed to the wall by your ears, and exposed to public shame. I ought, at least, to break your ribs with this cudgel, and I have a great mind to do it!"

It would not have been difficult to satisfy, or rather, it is almost certain that the energetic veteran would have satisfied his inordinate appetite for thrashing his fellow-men, on this occasion as on so many others, had not the landlady interposed at that moment.

"What are you about to do, sir? Maltreat a priest! Such a scandal shall not happen in my house!"

Having somewhat recovered from his astonishment, Father Gil said in a firm voice:

"Gentlemen, I accompanied this young woman hither at her request, because she desires to enter a convent and consecrate herself to God, to which her father has offered opposition without reason or right, and because of which he maltreated her most barbarously."

"I maltreat my daughter, you scoundrel!" shrieked the hunchback in the height of indignation. "You lie, and anyone lies who says so. I did not even know that she wished to enter a convent, neither should I have opposed it."

Father Gil was astounded, and could not utter a word, for Osuna's accents denoted sincerity.

"I think what is proper in this case," announced D. Peregrín, in his snuffling administrative voice, "is to give immediate information of the affair to the civil authorities. When I was governor of Tarragona, a priest presented himself to me——"



"Have done with Tarragona, D. Peregrín," interrupted Señor de las Casas. "And you, D. Gil, the enamored, go to the infernal regions, if you like."

"To say that I maltreat my daughter because she wishes to become a nun!" Osuna continued to exclaim in a low voice, as he aided the landlady. "Scoundrel, worse than scoundrel!"

"Forgive me, Señor Osuna. I thought it was the case," said the priest.

"Good, good. We will settle that question in Peñascosa," ejaculated D. Martín, with characteristic energy. "Now, get out of here! get out!"

Father Gil directed his steps toward the door, but just as he was about to pass through it, D. Martín shouted at him, as though he stood in front of a battalion: "Halt! Friend Osuna," he said, addressing the hunchback, "a grave insult has been inflicted on you, and you cannot appear decently unless you now box the ears of the person who has offended you. [Pointing to Father Gil.]"

An embarrassing silence ensued. Osuna's face expressed discomfort and hesitation.

"Never mind, never mind," continued the ferocious veteran, with his resonant voice, like the actor of old men's parts in a theater, "you are not a man of honor, you have not a jot of shame if you leave this offense unchastized."

Osuna still hesitated for a moment, and cast a glance of entreaty at the veteran; but on beholding that terror inspiring countenance, he finally made up his mind. Rising on tiptoe he delivered a resounding slap on the cheek of the priest.



“Jesus!” exclaimed the landlady. “This is an iniquity!”

Father Gil turned excessively pale; two tears rose to his eyes, but he made no motion to fling himself on his aggressor.



### XIII.

THANKS to Obdulia's resolute action the matter was not brought before the courts. From the very first moment, she confessed that she was the author of the flight and the sole person responsible ; the vicar had committed no fault in accompanying her, after her incessant entreaties and her making use of the artifice of ill treatment at home. D. Peregrín Casanova, desirous no doubt of proving that he cherished no ill-will toward Osuna for certain past scenes, continued to advocate that judicial proceedings should be begun. They had been reconciled for a long time already. In Peñascosa, private individuals insulted each other publicly, called each other scoundrel, wretch, etcetera, etcetera, and a week later, they could be seen taking coffee together. But this is not a peculiarity of Peñascosa. The same thing happens in Sarrió and in Nieva. Otherwise, how would life be possible in those illustrious towns ?

All the sensible persons in town were opposed to D. Peregrín's ideas ; some through affection for the vicar, some through timidity, others because they saw no use in stirring up a scandal. Nearly all advised Osuna to remain quiet. Nevertheless, the enemies, let us rather say the enviers, of the vicar, were horribly agitated. They were not willing to assent



to the damsel's version. They believed that it was a fable invented by her to shield him; and if they did not believe it, they declared that they did, lowering their voices and smiling maliciously. They showered sarcasms on the priest and his spiritual daughter, and they set afloat in the town a thousand more or less ingenious jests concerning their journey.

It is easy to divine that the person who labored most earnestly in this propaganda, although in a crafty manner, was Father Narciso. The chaplain from Sarrió was not content with having humiliated his rival by wresting from him the office of coadjutor, which, in justice, belonged to him. He desired, at any cost, to make an end of him, to grind him to dust, that his name might never more be heard in the mouths of the pious women of Peñascosa.

The occasion appeared to him very opportune to this end. With this object in view, he spontaneously accosted Osuna, and inquired whether he did not mean to have recourse to the courts? When he learned that this was not possible, because Obdulia assumed the entire responsibility, and declared that she had deceived her confessor, he felt a profound affliction. Such was his eagerness to exterminate Father Gil, that, although his relations with Obdulia had been strained for a long time, and might even be designated as open hostility, he ventured to sound her. Three or four days after her return to Peñascosa he saw her one morning in church. He sent an acolyte to her, to say that he desired to speak with her, and that he was waiting for her in



the vestry. The young woman went thither, though very much against her will. The coadjutor made himself all honey ; he treated her with extreme affection ; he handled his adulation with spirit, for he knew that self-esteem was a quick and tender spot with her. When he thought that he had rendered her tractable, he represented to her, with much circumlocution, that he, in his quality of assistant rector, was charged with the duty of watching over the honor of all his parishioners ; that hers had been matter for gossip in the mouths of the town for several days, and that it weighed upon his soul, because of the special affection which he entertained for her. It afflicted him all the more because he was sure that she had given no cause for it. He was acquainted with her generous character, her noble spirit ; hence he was convinced that on this occasion, as on so many others, she had sacrificed herself for other people. Now, this sacrifice was not permissible ; it might be regarded as a sin. Our honor does not belong to us ; it is committed to our keeping by God, and we are under obligations to defend it. On the other hand, the dishonor fell not only on her, but on her aged father. The poor old man beheld himself the object of ridicule and gossip in town on this account. Still more ; although such a trait of generosity might be accepted as good, both she and her father were members of the church, and it was their duty to denounce to the ecclesiastical authorities, any priest who should transgress the limits of his functions, in the exercise of his ministry, that he



might receive the condign and fraternal punishment which the canons prescribe. This redounded to the good of the faith. She, so excellent a Christian, ought not to permit God's justice to be mocked at. He understood perfectly how painful it would be for her to declare herself against her confessor ; but it was a greater sacrifice than the one which she was then executing, and God would surely reward her for it. Moreover, she must take into account the fact that her denunciation of her confessor would not cause him any injury ; on the contrary, the chastisement of the Church is considered as a good, as a just expiation, which, when it is accompanied by repentance, redeems the sin and frees us from the pains of hell.

Poor Father Narciso did not know with whom he had to deal, in spite of his having been intimate with her for so long. Before he had uttered a word, Obdulia knew what he was going to say to her, and also in what form, more or less ; she knew him as well as though she had passed her life inside his brain. That monkish skill made up of common places, was shattered against the lively imagination and the subtle and perspicacious mind of the devout young woman. She replied to the priest in the same persuasive, unctuous tone which she had adopted. She had nothing of which she could accuse Father Gil, who was a saint, an exceptional being, whose splendor had served as a beacon in the parish, ever since his fortunate arrival there, and whose modesty, abnegation, and piety might serve as an example and a stimulus to his colleagues. But



even had she any cause for accusing him, she should take very good care not to do so, knowing that the scandal would profit most to the enemies of religion. The error of a woman, when she is unmarried, redounds solely to her own prejudice. That of a priest results in a loss of prestige to his class and to the deterioration of the Catholic religion. She added various other reasons, and among them more than one pointed phrase of double meaning, which she knew seared the new coadjutor to the quick.

“Well, good-by, D. Narciso, and forgive me if I have not been able to comprehend thoroughly your charitable intentions. I am a weak woman, and I do not understand theology.”

Father Narciso was left grinning like a rabbit. Perceiving that this road was barred to him, he entered resolutely on another, no less tortuous. D. Joaquin, the chaplain and steward of Señora de Barrado, as well as Father Melchor, born enemies of the young vicar, vomited venom against him. But there were various other ecclesiastics in Peñascosa, who had always remained impartial. He contrived to win over the latter by representing the affair to them from another point of view, assuring them that he had secret reasons for knowing the facts. The journey had been a real abduction frustrated. The girl was sacrificing herself. The vicar had conceived a sacrilegious passion. For a long time he, D. Narciso, had expected what had come to pass. The escapade had been planned three months beforehand, and so forth, and so on. He filled their heads with wind. The position which he occupied as



rector, in fact if not in justice, greatly facilitated this winning over. It was agreed by the majority of all the ecclesiastics in town that the vicar was a wretched, insignificant lad, without weight or gravity, who had depreciated the sacerdotal caste, and that God knows where he would stop, if the bishop did not take a hand in the game.

From that time forth, they lost no opportunity to show their scorn for him. There is nothing which gives human nature so much pleasure as scorn. They began to salute him coldly, then to turn away their heads, then not to answer him. When he entered the vestry, he observed that, if there were other priests present, they held aloof from him, and formed a group by themselves. If he went to don his vestments, to say mass, he found the wardrobe containing the vestments locked, on most days; he was obliged to wait until D. Narciso arrived, and ask him for the key. They cut him out of the functions, whenever that was possible; they did not invite him to the *gaudeamus* which they celebrated. In short, they annoyed him in every form and manner which they could devise. And these were sufficiently numerous.

Father Gil was surprised and vexed by this disdain. Seeing that his colleagues got on without him, he dispensed with their company without great grief. He talked only with Father Norberto and D. Miguel. The old rector, who had been deprived of the chief dignity in fact, maintained his rights with tenacity none the less, and invented a thousand schemes to demonstrate it to the neighborhood.



Between him and D. Narciso there existed a profound, ferocious enmity. But the latter was afraid of him. The old chieftain of the Carlist army was capable, if slightly irritated, of horsewhipping him in the church itself. D. Miguel triumphed through terror. Father Narciso affected to despise him, but always behind his back. To his face, he treated him with extreme consideration, and endured with patience the rudeness which the latter poured out upon him from time to time. And when the coadjutor chanced to say, as he preached to the parishioners, at the offertory of the mass: "It is incumbent upon us rectors, etcetera," D. Miguel, from his nook where he listened to the mass, ejaculated in a tolerably loud voice, so that those who stood near could hear him: "I am the rector! I am the rector!"

As they emerged together one day from the church, Father Gil, who had just received a forcible rebuff from his colleagues, mentioned it to him, not as though in complaint, but as though he were communicating a piece of information.

"Pay no attention to them," replied the old chieftain, laying his hand, wrinkled and dry as a faggot of vine cuttings, on his shoulder. "They are magpies. They live tied to the petticoats of the pious women, like cats. See here: when I come from saying mass as now, and return home, I never fail to launch at them half a dozen. But if you are aggrieved, you can run up to a dozen, without impropriety."

A brutal burst of laughter, resembling a roar,



shook his vigorous breast as he uttered these words. His eyes gleamed with frank, cordial joy. The vicar flushed as red as a cherry, and remained silent. He did not again attempt to make a confidant of him on that point.

His inner life caused him too much torment to leave him much time for thinking of these trifles. Skepticism was undermining him secretly. The world appeared to him more incomprehensible every day. The constant idea that everything which surrounded him was mere appearance, whose real sense would remain eternally unknown to man, engendered in his soul a profound melancholy, which was reflected in his pallid brow, in the sad and indifferent smile which hovered on his lips. All experience, said Kant, is nothing more than a knowledge of the phenomenon, not a thing in itself. The latter hides itself and will hide itself forever, to human reason. Plato had also said it before him. The things of this world, such as our senses perceive them, have no reality. While we shut ourselves up exclusively in sensible perception, we are like prisoners seated in an obscure cavern ; so strongly chained that we cannot turn our heads. They see nothing. They only perceive, on the wall opposite them, the light of the fire, which burns behind them the shadows of the things which pass between them and the fire. And they themselves are not seen either, except as shadows cast on the wall. Our science, then, is reduced and always will be reduced, to predicting, in accordance with experience, the order in which the shadows will follow each other.



Sad results after so many efforts! The entire universe appeared to him like a fugitive shadow which vanishes with the individual who gazes upon it. It is the *Maya*, as the *Vedas* say, it is the veil of illusion which, covering the eyes of mortals, makes them behold a world of which they cannot say that it exists or that it does not exist, a world which resembles a dream, the radiation of the sun on the sand, where the traveler believes that he describes a lake from afar. Having lost faith, not only in his reason, but also in his feelings, the life of our priest swept on indifferently, silently, in the midst of an infinite loathing.

Obdulia had not seen him during the fortnight following her return. The pious young woman went out very little, for reasons easy to understand, and she managed to go to the church at hours when the vicar was not there. This last was not precisely the result of shame, but on account of the same amorous sentiment, which continued to agitate her heart. She believed, and reasons for her belief were not lacking, that, assuming the gossip that was in circulation in the town, and the war of all the ecclesiastics, and principally that of D. Narciso, any approach to her confessor would compromise him. Thus she imposed upon herself this sacrifice with the satisfaction of suffering for the adored being. But it became a torment which was beyond her strength. Her mad passion, instead of subsiding, grew more exalted day by day. She no longer lived, except upon the image of the young vicar. She even beheld it in her sleep. And her lawless



fancy forged an endless chain of illusions. She gave herself up to the thought that Father Gil returned her love, and in order to believe this, she wrenched all his words and actions out of joint. Once he had pressed her hand with fierce force, again he had smiled on her from a distance, on another occasion he had blushed when he met her, and so forth, and so on. She converted everything into substance. Then the trip to Palencia became for her the subject of minute feverish scrutiny. His cheerfulness in the carriage, when they were breakfasting, and she had cleaned the fish of its spines; the scene in the boat when she had seen him melancholy to the verge of tears, as he listened to her; the perturbation which had taken possession of him in the train, when she invited him to remove her shoes; finally that kiss of love upon her lips, which impressed her to the point of losing consciousness, all appeared to her, in the light of memory, as so many indubitable signs of the sentiment which held the breast of her confessor in suspense. The poor man was a saint, and his love was doing battle with his duty. She believed that this battle rendered her doubly interesting in his eyes, and exalted still further, if that were possible, her ungovernable passion.

Finally, the idea of seeing him once more dawned in her brain. The idea was immediately converted into a resolve, and inundated her with joy. The interview must be secret, no one in Peñascosa must know of it. This satisfied her desire not to compromise him, and, at the same time, the condition



of her temperment, which was always inclined to mystery. She determined that it should take place by night: she would surprise the vicar in his chamber, enjoy a few moments of affectionate expansion, and depart on the instant. At last she pitched upon the day. During the whole of it she was nervous, sweetly agitated, like the schoolgirl who beholds her lover scale the gratings of her window by night.

When the hour arrived, she told her father that her head ached, by way of excuse for retiring early. As soon as she heard him leave the house, she threw a mantle over her shoulders with trembling hands, and accompanied by her maid, who was her perpetual screen, she took her way to the vicar's house. Her limbs failed her for delight, and her heart beat violently.

The curious part of it all is, that it never once occurred to her that this love was sacrilegious. She felt no remorse. Her unbalanced brain turned divine and social laws upside down, and founded them anew, in accordance with her caprice. To her the love of the young priest was pure idealism, conformed to the Christian spirit; she had found various similar cases in the lives of the saints. When she had dreamed of fleeing with him to some sweet and delicious spot, it was always under the supposition that she was to continue confessing to him, and that they were to ascend to heaven together. If the flesh spoke within her, she either did not listen to it, or she feigned not to hear it, thus deceiving herself.



On reaching the priest's house, she ordered her maid to remain at the door; she would be down again directly. She rang, all in a tremble. Da. Josefa opened the door. As she had not seen the old woman since her famous journey, she flung herself into her arms, and embraced and kissed her with affected effusion. The housekeeper seemed but ill pleased; she received her with glacial coldness; ever since she had known her, she had fought with herself to restrain herself from hurling at her a mass of insults, and from slamming the door in her face. The only thing which had withheld her was the idea that her master had made peace with the pious woman, which she deplored, in the depths of her soul, regarding it as very bad and dangerous.

Obdulia pretended not to notice the good woman's coldness.

"Is he at home?" she asked, with the same smiling mien.

"Yes. I will go and tell him."

"There is no need. He ordered me to come at this hour, and he will be expecting me."

She immediately set off upstairs, and went to Father Gil's room. Da. Josefa watched her ascending with aversion and distrust. To inquire if he were at home, and then to say that he was expecting her, contained a manifest contradiction. For this reason, and through native curiosity, she followed her after the lapse of a few moments. With her heart dancing with delight, Obdulia approached the door of the study and peered through the key-hole. Father Gil was seated at his writing table,



reading by the light of a lamp. A smile of affection and enthusiasm contracted the lips of the godly young woman. She opened the door abruptly, in order to give him an agreeable surprise, and exclaimed with joy:

“Father, here I am!”

The priest raised his eyes in amazement. The woman's smile suddenly froze on her face. Instead of the delight which she had expected, she beheld a lighting flash of rage dart through them, which was instantly followed by an expression of absolute indifference, the same expression of weariness and loathing which his face had worn for some time past. He rose slowly from his seat, without replying to his penitent's exclamation, and advanced toward her in silence. The pious girl retreated a pace, bending upon him a gaze of mingled anguish and terror. The priest grasped her by one arm, and gently, but firmly, led her in silence to the door, thrust her out of the study, and locked it.

Obdulia stumbled over a mass of something. It was Da. Josefa, who laughed in her face.

“It appears that you are not received under a canopy like a king, señorita!”

She did not answer. Pale, with heart violently contracted, and in a state of weakness which made her stagger, she descended the staircase without knowing what she was doing. Da Josefa, breaking off her flood of laughter, followed her to the street door, screaming after her in wrathful tones, and endeavoring to lower her voice:



"You are in a pretty business, you slothful, disgraceful creature! You ought to be ashamed of yourself! To deceive my poor master, and drag him round from pillar to post like a lad of straw! Just look at the little nun! Is this your religion? Is this your delicacy? Get away from here! Go to your own house, and have honesty, and have shame, and don't run the streets, you hussy."

She sallied forth into the street, crushed, humiliated, broken. She was obliged to cling to the walls of the houses to keep from falling. The horrors and monstrosities which the vicar's housekeeper had spit upon her rang incessantly in her ears like the blows of a hammer. There was a moment when she thought that she was about to lose consciousness, but from the depths of her being welled up a raging cry, a cry for vengeance, which bade her hold firm. And she obeyed the command, exerting a vast effort over herself. She rested for a few moments, propped against a wall, passed her hand over her brow, then walked rapidly homeward, followed by the maid, who had been unable to obtain a reply to any of her questions.

Although she felt very badly she made a point of sitting up for her father. When he arrived, at eleven o'clock, she followed him to his chamber and after shutting the door, she suddenly said to him:

"Papa, I did not tell you the truth when you found me with the vicar."

The hunchback gave vent to a howl of rage.

"Ah, how sure I was of it!" And he began to pace up and down the room like a tiger, pouring



forth insults and blasphemies. After a while he halted in front of his daughter. "In any case, you have lost your honorable reputation in the town. It is necessary that this infamous fellow should not be allowed to laugh at you. Are we agreed?"

"I am agreed," she replied firmly, "and I have confessed to you with that object."

Osuna fixed upon her a glance of surprise and curiosity.

"Come," he said after a pause, with a sarcastic smile, "there has been a breach."

"It matters little whether there has been one or not," she replied, with a peevish accent. "What interests me at this moment is, that I should not be made to pay alone for the fault of both—for his fault principally."

The hunchback assented with all his soul, for he was still more engrossed with his vengeance upon the vicar than with his daughter's disgrace. And they began to whisper at great length upon the means to be employed to bring this about. Four o'clock in the morning had struck when Obdulia emerged from her father's room.

She went to bed in a fever. She could not get to sleep. The scene in which she had just played so sorry a part presented itself to her imagination with ever increasing relief. Despite all the efforts which she made, it was impossible to blot it from her mind even for a moment. Her self-love groaned as though her flesh were being torn off with pincers.

As soon as she rose, she summoned her father and, as they had agreed upon, both of them went to see Father Narciso. This was her idea. She under-



stood that the person of all others in Peñascosa who could aid them the most in their enterprise against the vicar was the coadjutor, and to him they betook themselves. He seemed surprised at her resolution and even hypocritically tried to dissuade them ; but he overflowed so with joy at every pore, that one rather sharp word from Obdulia sufficed to render him as pliable as a glove.

Osuna suggested the idea of applying to the bishop. D. Narciso opposed this with decision. It was a common offense and the ordinary courts should take cognizance of it. When they had finished their part, it would be quite time enough to petition the Church to chastise the culprit. The crafty priest knew very well that the ecclesiastical courts contrive to cover up the crimes of its priests in order to avert scandals, the consequences of which are worse. The Church feigns not to believe them in order not to perceive the necessity for imposing a penalty which shall excite too much remark. Accordingly they determined to lodge a complaint with the examining magistrate. On the following day Obdulia went to Lancia to consult one of the most prominent lawyers on the case. She entrusted him with the direction of the affair, left him her appointed attorney, and went through with him, under the seal of the greatest secrecy, all the steps conducive to her undertaking, not forgetting to procure several letters from the most influential persons in the province for the judge of Peñascosa.

While these threatening clouds were accumulating around his head, the innocent vicar walked from his house to the church, from the church to his



house, his brow pallid, his face melancholy and resigned. His eyes, ordinarily fixed on the earth, occasionally directed timid glances at the populace as though he feared that through them the secret which was devouring his heart would be discovered. He no longer read any books but those of entertainment; he did not meditate. Weary of stumbling always over the same impassable wall, he shunned in terror launching his thoughts through the spheres of metaphysics.

Nevertheless, there came a moment when he did so without being aware of it. It was on a placid May night. A little more than a month had elapsed since the famous journey to Palencia. He had read a portion of a certain Greek history, from the library of Montesinos, which had been dispersed at the latter's death. He felt warm and tired. He extinguished his lamp, opened the doors of the gallery, carried out his armchair, and seated himself there to enjoy the sea breeze. For a few moments he fixed his gaze attentively on the celestial vault studded with stars, and tried to recognize some of the constellations. Then he contemplated the Milky Way, which was admirably outlined on that particular evening, with the amazement which that always produces. That white fillet, where the stars seem like the finest dust, always caused him a profound stupor, amazement. Every grain of that dust is a body thousands of times larger than the earth, which makes other planets circle round it though we are unable to perceive them.

“And still,” he said to himself, after a moment,



emerging from his stupor with a sigh, "all these grandeurs no longer terrify me, because they have no reality. The existence of these stars is the pendant to the thread of my reason. I bear within me the eternal form of these objects, as of all the rest. They are nothing in my eyes but a mirror in which my inner being is reflected. Through the medium of the mechanism of my brain, of my faculty for knowing, the fantastic comedy which is called the external world is played. This infinite time, athwart which matter exists, clothing itself in ever varying forms; this infinite space also, which you fill, ye luminous spheres, exists only in my imagination; they are forms which I carry ready prepared in my brain, in order that you may be, or, what is the same thing, that you may be represented in me.

"But what is there behind this phenomenon, the only thing which I can perceive? What is the true and innermost being of the universe? Are these infinite worlds, perchance, outside of my imagination? Yes. Absolute idealism is an absurdity, for I am the object of representation to the rest of mankind, and yet, I hold the absolute certainty that I exist apart from this representation. The same thing happens to other men. What am I, separated from that corporeal form in which I see myself, outside that time and space which I carry in my own brain? What is my own essence, and the essence of the universe?

"I do not know. I shall never know. The efforts of philosophy have been dashed to atoms against



that impenetrable mystery. Up to this time, no one has deciphered the great enigma of existence. A few privileged beings have tried to pass behind the veil, and have offered to us, each one according to his fancy, systems pleasant or lugubrious, austere or frivolous, as that which constitutes the foundation of life. But these systems possess no scientific value; they are nothing more than hypotheses. The step from representation to being is a mortal bound, in which have perished the most sagacious philosophers, the most sublime geniuses of humanity. Kant, the giant, who has couched the cataracts of my intelligence, attributes to the imperative of the moral conscience an absolute value outside of time and space. Setting out from this, he believes that he penetrates with assured tread into the mysteries of infinite essence. Illusions! This imperative is a phantasm. The materialistic philosophers have attacked it with their scalpel of criticism, and it has been shown to be hollow. Schopenhauer, that subtle thinker who is carrying away the youth of to-day, places the Will—which, in his opinion, is the thing in itself—outside the world of phenomena. Why? For the same reason that he calls it Will, the scholastics have called it *ens realissimum*, and their predecessors in Germany called it the *absolute*. Try as he will to conceal it, his theory is founded, like the rest, on pure hypothesis, and hypotheses have no value in science; they are sustained only by faith."

As he formulated this last word in his brain, his heart leaped in his breast, he knew not why. He



was vaguely conscious that he had come in contact with something to which he could cling, and again he was plunged into profound meditation.

“There is no doubt about it. That which science can give us is the relations of things under the sovereignty of time and space. It will never tell me their essence. In order to know anything of it, my faculty of knowing must be transformed. And why should I not allow it to be transformed? Why should not I cut loose for a moment from my reason and lend assent to the presentiments of my soul, to the inward voice, which explains to me in a clear manner the divine essence of the Universe? Reason does not tell me why the setting of the sun in the sea is beautiful. Yet it is beautiful! Reason does not tell me that San Juan de Dios is sublime when he embraces lepers. Yet he is sublime! Ah, yes! Above this vulgar knowledge, which renders me a slave to matter, there is another which emancipates me. The eyes of the body do not penetrate into the profound inwardness of being; but faith needs no eyes; they depict if blindfolded. I possess not only a reason, which explains to me the appearance of things; there exists also in my spirit a constant revelation, which illuminates them from within. Why need I part company with this revelation? Why need I shut my eyes to the sighs of my soul? This revelation is the most precious treasure with which I have been endowed. I wish to enjoy it; I wish to recover my liberty, and respond to the divine summons within me. This revelation tells me that I am a stranger in the world, subjected to neces-



sity, and that I can break the bonds which unite me to it. It bids me shake off the yoke of time, and distinguish between what there is within me that is temporal, and what is eternal. If I call up in my brain the eternal forms of objects, it means that I am superior, and possess an existence independent of them. This existence is the only one in me that is real; the rest is pure appearance, and as it has been born, so it must die. I wish to live that free, immortal life; I wish to know directly that eternal truth which is concealed behind this universe. 'The hour will come,' said Jesus, 'in which the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and they that hear it shall live.' The hour is come for me. Oh, yes! eternal God, past time and space, and all ephemeral forms of existence, I behold Thee, immutable, infinite, sole fountain of truth and of life, sole light in the darkness which envelops our temporal life; I see Thee, I acknowledge Thee, I adore Thee!"

A shock similar to that produced by an electric current caused him to rise suddenly to his feet. His heart beat with such force that he raised his hands to his breast. A great, intense motion rose from it to his throat, and compressed it. He felt himself flooded with a strange joy. He began to pace the gallery, seized with restlessness which pained him. It seemed to him as though his being had suddenly migrated into that of an angel, that in his spirit an august, ineffable mystery were in progress. He was seized with an impulse to laugh and cry at the same moment. He found himself in the



position of an exile who has suddenly been restored to his native land and the bosom of his family.

He was obliged to exert an effort over himself to keep from skipping, laughing, and shouting, like a person who has inhaled oxygen.

He was so abstracted in these thoughts, that he did not hear the noise of his study door opening, nor the footsteps of a person who advanced until he reached the corridor.

"Good-evening, Señor Vicar," said a familiar voice.

"Who is there? Ah! Is it you, Señor Judge? How is it that they have not struck a light?"

"It is unnecessary. The night is fine. This gallery is a grand institution, without a doubt."

They shook hands, and the examining judge, who was a man about forty years of age, with an open and sympathetic face, approached the railing of the gallery, and laid his hands on it.

"You must be surprised," he said, with affected indifference, "to see me here at this hour.\* Hist! A complaint has been lodged in the court. Nothing. It is of no importance, I suppose. But you know that all these legal matters are attended with so much formality. Then, in the hearing, not a rat is allowed to pass; everything must be in due order. In short, I find myself under the necessity of arresting you. I suppose that it will be for a very short time, a pure formality; but I must do it. I did not like to send the constable to you now, lest you should be alarmed, for the matter is not worth the trouble. I came in person to set you at your ease. Do not be



afraid, for the arrest is of no importance, and come with me. In that way, no one will know anything about it."

"A complaint? Of what am I accused?"

"Apparently, it is connected with that escapade of Osuna's girl. Do not be alarmed."

"I am not alarmed, judge. I am ready to follow you instantly. If you will permit, I will light the lamp to remove my slippers and put on my shoes."

"Whatever you wish, vicar," the judge made haste to say, "you may take the time to dispatch to the prison whatever effects you consider requisite."

The priest struck a match, and prepared to light the lamp. The judge was astounded. Instead of the pallid and discomposed countenance which he had thought to find, he could observe the happiest and most placid face that he had ever beheld in his life. In the glance which the vicar cast upon him, after he had lighted the lamp, shone a joy as pure as though he had come to notify him that he had been made a bishop. The judge retreated a pace, and fixed his eyes on him with suspicion. But he was reassured, on seeing the perfect calmness with which he made his preparations. He packed some clothing in a valise, put on his shoes, his cassock and his hat, and said, with a smile:

"I am ready. We priests do not take much time to settle matters, do we? I shall say nothing to Da. Josefa, in order to avoid a sad scene; do you not think that will be better? I will write to her from prison, and ask her for clothing."



The judge approved of all that he said, and they descended the stairs and sallied forth into the street like two friends. During their walk the young priest gave signs of a loquacity and cheerfulness which had not been observable in him for a long time past. They entered the jail, the judge selected the best room, and after installing him in it he took leave with growing surprise, when he saw that the priest remained as serene and smiling there as in his own house.

He left the prison quickly, deeply impressed. As he walked up the street of the Quadrant, his imagination fumbled about in search of an explanation for this extraordinary conduct.

The examining judge was far from suspecting that on entering the prison, the vicar of Peñascosa had just escaped from the dungeons of skepticism.



#### XIV.

“KEEP order, gentlemen!”

The voice of the crier rang out imperative, strident, but did not succeed in calming the laughter and the murmurs of the spectators. For, although the president of the court had resolved that the trial should take place behind closed doors, in view of the delicate character of the crime, and the persons who had interposed in it, there were so many lawyers who claimed their right to be present, and so many permits had been issued, that a numerous assembly was speedily formed, and one which was more uneasy than might have been expected.

The criminal court room of the audience hall at Lancia was a large, dark, rectangular dusty room. At the further end, under a canopy of faded damask, the three magistrates who composed the bench were seated in velvet armchairs. On one side was the private prosecutor, with a table before him. Fronting him was the defender. The court reporter stood facing the judges. Behind was the defendant, on his little bench.

The witness who occupied the stand at that moment was the coachman who had driven Father Gil and his penitent from Peñascosa to the station of La Reguera. He was called by the plaintiff. He was an elderly man, with an extremely red face, illu-



minated by alcohol as much as by inclement weather. He wore a jacket as thick as a pack-saddle, and twisted his cloth cap in his fingers with embarrassment, as he gave his testimony. His voice was hoarse, as is befitting every driver who thinks anything of himself; his style was picturesque and he occasionally abused tropes somewhat.

“Then the master, he says to me; ‘Lico, you’re to go to Peñascosa, for some gentle folks. You go no further than the tavern of Marica, and there you sleep. Take straw for the cattle, for there aint none there.’ In this the master spoke well, for there is straw in Marica’s house, only she will not give it to anyone who happens along, of course. ‘Take Firebrand and Simple; they’re the beasts to drag the carriage.’ ‘That’s according and in proportion,’ said I. ‘Firebrand’s a dog. When I give him the signal not to go, you can just light your candle, he won’t budge!’”

“Have done with your firebrands and candles, and tell us what you know about the matter,” interrupted the president, in an irritated voice.

This president was an obstinate, choleric impertinent old man, who conducted the sessions of the court like a school for small boys. He gave offense to criminals and witnesses, and did not respect the lawyers much more. He showed his sympathies and his antipathies with a frankness that was astounding. Notwithstanding, he was not a wicked man, and he did not act in bad faith. Everything depended on his excessively nervous temperament, and on his age, which had impaired his intellect.



“Very good, sir, I’ll drive at the point. At one o’clock, a minute more or less, this Señor Cura arrives,” pointing to the accused, “and gets into the coach. We got to Marica’s house; it might have been about six o’clock. There the gentleman left us and told us that he would come back on the next day, very early, with another person, and that we were to go back to Lancia. In the night a small boy came and fetched me two valises and on the next morning, very early, the señor came with a female who was all wrapped up. Then I harnessed up, and then I went into the tavern to clean my gullet. No one was there but Marica. ‘Do you know, Marica,’ said I, ‘that I don’t like to take that little priest and the female in the carriage?’ ‘Why not?’ ‘Because that man wasn’t made for such offices as these, all the same, you understand,’ ‘Ave Maria, what an ass you are, Lico! Stop that! Aren’t you ashamed?’ ‘My Marica, you haven’t been about the world as I have. I’ve been in Leon, in Palencia, in Salamanca’ and even in the land of Extramadura.’ ”

These were the words which had created the uproar already mentioned. Neither the criers with their shouts, nor the president with his bell could appease it for some time. Finally, the latter managed to make himself heard. He threatened to clear the room instantly, and this sufficed to re-establish silence. Then he turned to the witness once more.

“I warn the witness that if he has been through all the places he says, he is not on a good road now. Abstain from coarse phrases and speak the truth simply.”



After the coachman, the shepherd lad deposed. His testimony was of no importance. Then several pious women of Peñascosa were called, and declared in vague terms that they had observed a certain unusual friendship between Obdulia and her confessor, although they had never thought any evil of her. Father Narciso also gave his testimony. His testimony was a model of hypocrisy and malice. While uttering hyperbolical eulogies upon the virtue and talent of his colleague, he contrived, none the less, to drive the dagger in up to the hilt. His insidious reticences, the sad and patronizing tone in which he excused the faults of the priest, and his last words, calculated to excite the leniency of the bench, caused a profound impression in the audience. He appeared to be justifying his colleague ; but in his actions and gestures it was plainly to be read that he condemned him.

All eyes were turned to the accused. Father Gil remained what he had been three months previously, on his entrance into the prison of Peñascosa. His face had grown still whiter with imprisonment. Instead of the weariness and melancholy which it had reflected of late, there was now to be seen a cheerful serenity, a firmness which had disconcerted all present at the oral examination. It seemed as though these debates had nothing to do with him, that it was not his honor and liberty which were under discussion. The opinion which prevailed in the assembly, and which the liberal press of Lancia had already echoed, was, that this priest was a cynic, with little or no shame. It was not necessary to be very



keensighted to perceive that he had won the antipathy of the bench, above all of the president, who had already made it plain on several occasions. The accused glanced at Father Narciso, from time to time, with a firm and tranquil gaze, as he had at every witness who had testified. The coadjutor spoke with his eyes fixed on the floor, and everyone applauded his modesty and the moderation of his words.

D. Martín de las Casas was the next to emerge from the witnesses' room. After his name, age, rank, profession, and so forth, the president asked him:

"Have you ever been on trial?"

D. Martín, who was considerably perturbed, for he was above all, a man of action, as we know, and not of law, replied hesitatingly:

"I do not remember."

"You don't remember, man! That sort of thing is not generally forgotten."

The president's phrase aroused great merriment in the audience. The witness gnashed his teeth. He would have given his other shoulder to be able to deal that old man a cuff. The latter, observing his irritation, interrupted him several times during his deposition, addressing to him several facetious questions which delighted the audience. The ferocious chieftain of Peñascosa hoarded up in the space of a few minutes so much wrath, that he contemplated nothing less than spitting in the face of the president and bidding him defiance, as soon as they should get out into the street. Nevertheless, this forcible man, worthy to have lived in the age of iron,



stumbled across him in the club that evening and, instead of insulting him, he took off his hat to him with much reverence.

D. Peregrín Casanova was summoned immediately after, and, quite the reverse of what had happened with his friend, he entered the hall majestically, snorting and pitching like a steamer which is making up alongside the pier. In substance, the ex-temporary Governor of Tarragona came to state that the vicar of Peñascosa had never been the saint of his adoration. Reserved, gentle, silent characters had not turned out well in his experience. They might, with other people, he did not dispute that, but he, in his long administrative career, had had numerous subordinates who had been on the point of compromising him, and these men had always possessed characters similar to that of the accused. When the report had run through Peñascosa that Obdulia had fled with the vicar, he had said: "Impossible! I am sure that this man has carried her off by means of deceit. I have been watching him for a long time, and I do not need so much proof. I pride myself on having a good nose." [On what did D. Peregrín not pride himself?] In spite of the fact that certain differences existed between him and Osuna, he forgot them immediately, for he had never been rancorous, and had offered to accompany him in pursuit of the pair. He had blushed with indignation. Then he tried to enter into philosophical considerations as to the magnitude of the crime, and the advantage which must accrue to society from the punishment admin-



istered with a firm hand by the courts, in such cases; but the president stopped him. The pedantic, the nasal and vehement tone, and the action like that of a dominie who is delivering his declamation, had made a bad impression on the spectators, but worst of all on the president, who stared at him with grim eyes from the moment he began. When his patience was at an end, and it took a long time to exhaust it, he said, in the harsh voice of a little old man:

“Perhaps you would like to give us a course of lectures on penal law? Drop your philosophizing and state the facts as God has let you understand them, which is very badly of a surety.”

“Mr. President, I think that I am perfectly within my right.”

“You have no right here, either perfect or imperfect.”

“Mr. President, I——”

“Enough. Retire.”

“Mr. President!”

“Retire immediately, or you will be expelled by the constables.”

Red with confusion, tremulous and abashed, on the point of weeping, the man who had ruled the destinies of Tarragona for more than two weeks finally left the room, stumbling as he went.

“Mr. President,” exclaimed the prosecuting attorney, haughtily, “this order weakens the proof which I propose to adduce and seems to me arbitrary.”

“I call the counsel to order!” shouted the president furiously, ringing his bell.



“Mr. President, I understand that the rights of the prosecution are in jeopardy——”

“I call the counselor to order for the second time!” shouted the president still more furiously, half rising from his seat, and hammering the table with his bell.

“Then I enter the corresponding protest.”

“Protest as much as you like, but abstain in the future from uttering disrespectful words to the president.”

The prosecuting attorney was a flabby young fellow, with a black beard, small, insolent eyes, selfish in all his ways. He figured as chief of the federal republicans in Lancia, and managed the periodical which they published. His hatred for the clergy was proverbial in the town. He had endured various skirmishes on this account; one of them with the bishop; he had been prosecuted for insulting religion. As was but natural, he seized by the hair every opportunity to vex its ministers. A trial like the present, in which a priest figured as the culprit, filled him with jubilation, and he attended to it with care as tender as though a sister's honor had been in question. After D. Peregrín, the landlady of the inn in Palencia was called. She was presented by the defense. She declared that she had observed singular relations between the priest and the young woman, but that they had in no way compromised the former. When they arrived they asked for horses to journey, on the following day, to Astudillo. The servant told her that they had not yet set out, because the lady had caught a slight cold



and was not risen. She went to see her, and found her pale, but not suffering from a cold. She asked her if her traveling companion, the priest, had been to see her, and she hastened to reply that he had not, in so lively a manner that it attracted her attention. Afterward she learned that she had sent a message to the priest, telling him to breakfast alone, and then come to her chamber. He remained there only a short time.

Da. Josefa, the vicar's housekeeper, also called by the defense, came out immediately after her.

It was said that this woman had proofs of her master's innocence, that she would relate very curious things. Her deposition was awaited with anxiety. When she had been sworn, and after the regulation questions, the president said to her, in the acrid tone which characterized him :

"Now, you are to tell what you know, but beware of impostures, for I have my eye on you." The counsul for the defense, who was a corpulent man, with large white whiskers, protested against this warning. Interrogated by the president, Da. Josefa stated that Obdulia had persecuted her master, and had worried him by proposing the flight to the convent.

That the vicar had tried, in vain, to dissuade her ; his efforts had been futile. She was so resolved to go that she would have gone alone, had he refused to accompany her. In view of this, her master, although with great ill will, had yielded. The witness herself had advised him to it, in order that he might rid himself of so insufferable a pious person.



"And is it not true," asked the counsel for the defense, "that a month, more or less, after their return from Palencia, the plaintiff presented herself one night, in the house of my client, and was turned out of doors by him?"

"Yes, sir."

"Explain to us how it was."

Da. Josefa related with exactness the scene with which the reader is already acquainted, without omitting the insults which she had hurled at the young woman.

"As this version," said the counsel for the defense, "does not tally with that presented by the plaintiff's statement that she did not speak with my client after her return from Palencia, I request that the witnesses be confronted."

"Mr. President," remarked Obdulia's counsel, "the plaintiff agrees to this petition of the defense, but requests that the confrontation may take place after the plaintiff has testified."

The president ruled thus. The counsel for plaintiff asked Da. Josefa:

"Is it true that the witness looked with evil eyes on my client, because she supposed that the latter was depriving her of a portion of the affection or esteem of her master?"

"Do not answer that question!" the president said hastily.

"Very good," said the counsel for plaintiff. "Is it not equally true that the witness detested all the spiritual daughters of the accused, and set up a sort of rivalry with them?"



"Do not answer that question either. It is as impertinent as the other."

"I renounce further cross-questioning," said the lawyer, with a malicious smile, which indicated clearly that he believed he had already attained his object.

The great sensation of this trial was still to come, that which, since its beginning, several days previous, had been looked forward to by everyone, in short—the testimony of the plaintiff, which stood last on the list. When the president gave the order to send her in, a prolonged murmur ran through the assembly, which was followed by a sepulchral silence. All eyes were turned to the door, with an expression of intense curiosity.

At length, Osuna's daughter made her appearance. She was dressed with both modesty and elegance. Her slender, distinguished figure, and the worn but interesting beauty of her face, caused a favorable impression under the circumstances. As she passed on to her place, she did not deign to cast a glance at her former confessor. She was paler than usual, and the circles round her eyes were more strongly defined; but an unwonted brilliancy and vehemence could be detected in her gaze.

The president put to her the legal queries, in a respectful and even gallant tone. She replied with notable clearness and precision.

"Is it true," the president asked, "that you have been the subject of a malicious and scandalous assault on the part of the defendant?"



“Yes, sir.”

“Relate the occurrences in the form which you think most fitting, without departing from the truth.”

“A very short time after the arrival of Father Gil in Peñascosa, to fill the office of vicar, I began to confess to him. I found him prudent, intelligent, and extraordinarily pious. The respect which I felt for his talents, and his virtues, was so great that malicious persons in town might easily have imagined that there existed in me an inclination for his person. I cannot deny that I entertained esteem and affection for him. During the time that he was my confessor, I never observed in him more than a spiritual esteem at times, not always, for he ordinarily showed himself severe and not communicative. Only toward the last did I begin to notice that he lingered longer than before over the confessions [laughter and murmurs in the audience]; that he tried to prolong them by entering into conversation which had nothing to do with them. I paid no attention to this, nor to the fact that once, when we parted, he held my hand in his for a long time. [More laughter. The president shakes his bell.] I attributed it to the confidence with which I had succeeded in inspiring him, for he had, in appearance at least, a very timid and retiring character. A year ago, at least, I expressed to him a desire to enter a convent, but he tenaciously opposed it. From time to time I returned to the charge, entreating him to help me to carry it out. I always encountered the same resistance until,



suddenly, a few months ago, he told me one day that he found my project very good and holy, and that he was disposed to lend me the means to realize it. The first thing which occurred to me, naturally, was to ask my father's permission. Father Gil opposed this. He said to me that it was not proper at that time; we would see about it later on. We began to discuss the question of the convent. I desired to enter that of the Augustines, in Lancia, but he told me that he knew of a convent of Carmelites in Astudillo which was just suited to me. It was a convent which had not more than ten or twelve nuns, was very tranquil, very remote, a real little nook of heaven, as he expressed it. [Laughter.] We made preparations for the expedition. He offered to accompany me. I did not cease to insist that my father should be informed of the plan. He did not oppose this openly, but he constantly deferred it. Finally, when the moment of putting it into execution arrived, he told me that he thought it more prudent not to impart it to him. The poor man was about to suffer a very great grief. Perhaps, perceiving the possibility of putting a stop to it, he would oppose it, while, if he learned it after it had been carried out, he would have no remedy but to resign himself to it. In short, he alleged a number of reasons which ended by convincing me——"

Here the plaintiff paused; she raised her hand to her brow, as though it pained her to recall what she was about to say—a gesture worthy of an actress of the highest rank.



"We set out one morning in March, at daybreak. He had prepared everything perfectly. The day before he had gone to Lancia, and brought back a carriage, which he had left in the neighborhood of Peñascosa. During the drive we spoke but little together. I was sad and uneasy. We did not enter Lancia, but went on to La Reguera to take the train there. We waited for a considerable time, and strolled along the bank of the river. Nothing told me then that I ought to conceive suspicions. Only when we were in the train, and were left alone, I noticed that he stared at me intently. I went off to the opposite corner. I tried to rest, and wished to take off my boots because they hurt me. Then he jumped up to take them off for me, and without waiting for a reply, he began to do it.

"This caused me shame, to tell the truth, and I was greatly disturbed. I was much vexed that I had gone away with him. Nevertheless, I managed to dissimulate. We reached Palencia, and sent in search of horses to take us to Astudillo on the following day. But on the next day, I felt very ill. The emotion of the journey had upset my nerves. Something worse was in store for me, unfortunately. The father came in to see me; he sat down and, after some commonplaces, he began to talk to me of love, like any gallant. He made me a declaration. He told me that he had only invented that journey.

"I found the strength to reply to him. I did it with such energy, that I confounded him.

"Then the landlady came to see me, and I was on



the point of telling her of what had happened, but I restrained myself. It pained me to the very soul to create a scandal and ruin a priest. I sent a message to the father that he should breakfast alone, and afterward come to see me. My object was to make him reflect a little, and beg him to write to papa, or telegraph him to come for me, under the pretext that I was ill, and could not enter the convent. He came after he had breakfasted ; but, instead of presenting himself in a state of repentance for what he had done, he began to make love to me again.

“Then I talked to him as was my duty, reminding him of his duties, and of the confidence which I had reposed in him. He paid no heed.”

A violent emotion ran through the audience. A prolonged murmur arose. All eyes, which up to that time had been fixed on the plaintiff, were directed to the defendant. Father Gil had listened to this infamous declaration at first with surprise, then with sad compassion, which the people around him, impressed by the young woman's words, were not able to read in his eyes. This tranquil attitude, this persistent gaze, fixed on his accuser, continued to be attributed to cynicism.

It was almost impossible that it should be otherwise. Obdulia, beneath the lash of wrath, had displayed a diabolical intent. Her speech and manners, though somewhat exaggerated, vibrated with indignation. Her eyes never met those of the priest ; but she understood well how to impart to her fear the aspect of scorn.

“I desire to have the plaintiff state,” said the



counsel for the defense, "how it happened that, after all which she has just described had occurred, she afterward confessed herself to be the sole author of the flight and said nothing until a long time had elapsed?"

"I said nothing through shame. I think that any woman would do the same in my case. What had I to gain by revealing such things? It was only when I beheld my honor being dragged through the mire, it was only when what was being said in Peñascosa came to my ears, that I ventured to confess to my father. I am here to-day by his command, and on no other terms would I have come."

She replied with admirable serenity and vivacity to all questions from the president and the other judges. Not for an instant did her imagination falter.

Father Gil's lawyer finally proposed to confront her with Da. Josefa. The latter entered again, and riveted a wrathful gaze upon Obdulia, who retorted with one of affected disdain. At the instance of the president, she repeated her story of the scene in which Father Gil had turned his penitent out of the house. After a few words, the latter showed signs of agitation and turned horribly pale.

"False, false!" she cried, unable to contain herself.

"Is it false that you entered my master's study, with the exclamation: 'Father, here am I!' and that my master, without uttering a word in reply, rose from his chair, seized you by the arm and led you out of the room?"



"'Tis a lie! This woman is mad. She invents a calumny to serve her master."

"I am not mad, no, nor do I calumniate anyone. The person who is calumniating a priest is you, you hussy, and you will have to render an account to God for your wickedness."

"Remove the witness," said the president. "Remove the plaintiff also, or I shall be obliged to expel them from the court."

But neither of them paid any heed to this threat. Obdulia continued to scream:

"'Tis false! You lie!"

"'Tis you who lie, and to satisfy your pride, you are trying to ruin a priest, a saint!"

"Silence!" shouted the president, pounding with his bell.

"May God grant you good health!" exclaimed the young woman with a sarcastic smile. "Don't calumniate others for the sake of saving him."

"Enough! Expel these women from the place," ejaculated the president, addressing the criers.

"You are the calumniator! You impostor! Scoundrel! You accuse him because he scorned you. Aren't you afraid that the earth will open and swallow you up?"

At that moment a crier seized her arm and pushed her brutally toward the door. But Da. Josefa continued to shriek until she reached it:

"There is no justice if this woman is not beaten; if she is not tarred and feathered! Rascal that you are!"



Another crier went to expel the other; but at the moment when he approached, Obdulia fell to the floor in a swoon. Her lawyer and the people near her hastened to her assistance. She was carried to the secretary's room. Two physicians in the assembly attended to her of their own accord.

The examination was ended, and after a few moments, the president gave the floor to the prosecutor.

His discourse was, as had been expected, eloquent and furious. His voice was thick, in consequence of a chronic bronchitis; when he tried to raise it it became shrill and strident. His language was fluent, though it abounded in the commonplaces of journalism. But no one in Lancia could speak with such terseness. He depicted Father Gil as a hypocritical, cringing being, who satisfied his shameful passions in secret and concealed them carefully for fear of losing his position. These passions are frequent among ecclesiastics, in whom they are excited by a regimen of idleness and a luxurious and sedentary life.

As he insisted too much on this point, the president called him to order.

He described the crime with picturesque crudeness, with the express view of impressing the bench. An odious plan sketched out beforehand, and carried out with implacable firmness and skill. An abuse of confidence in the first place, an attack on modesty in the second; finally a cowardly and sacrilegious violation. The proofs were conclusive. With both



vigor and subtlety he heaped them upon the head of the priest and wound up with this flourish : “ And as if all these irrefutable facts were not sufficient to demonstrate clearly the premeditation of the crime, I will adduce another. It has been said, and all have concurred upon this point, that Father Gil was taking his spiritual daughter to a convent of Carmelites in Astudillo. Well, then, most excellent sir, there is no convent of Carmelites in Astudillo. Does the court desire more ? ”

The speech was brief and overwhelming. At its close a murmur of approbation, which augured ill for the defendant, became audible.

The latter's counsel was a lawyer of intelligence and experience, but he was absolutely lacking in the oratorical gifts of his opponent. He had an abundant flow of language, but it was heavy, monotonous, more fitted to elucidate some obscure point in a civil trial than to carry away the minds of the court and the public. He undertook, with excessive probity, to reconstitute the summary, and to seek out informalities, calling the attention of the court to details, some of which were insignificant. He made no attempt, as he should have done, to set forth the character of the plaintiff, to throw into relief the chronically topsy-turvy state of her nervous system, the surprising violence of her feelings, in love as well as in hate, the sickly susceptibility of her self-love, which seemed to be deprived of skin and to have its live flesh always exposed ; he made no attempt, in short, to seek the origin, the real genesis of this strange accusation.



He talked for about an hour and a half. When he finished, both court and spectators were visibly fatigued. The prosecutor briefly rectified several errors of fact. The counsel for the defense sustained them, as was his manner, with great length and probity. So that the weariness produced by his first discourse was notably increased by the second.

Finally the president rang his bell and addressing the accused he said :

“In view of the proofs which have been produced and the remarks of the lawyers, has the accused anything to say to the court?” Father Gil rose from his bench and cast round the hall a gaze which was as gentle as it was vague. He looked as though he had been roused from a dream. He paused several minutes before he spoke. A deep and anxious silence reigned in the audience. In spite of the unfavorable atmosphere which had been formed around him, his delicate, poetic face, which beamed with humility, could not but produce a favorable impression.

“I am innocent of the crime which is imputed to me. I now leave my sentence in the hands of God, where I have long left all my thoughts and cares. May His will be done.”

These simple words, uttered with deliberation, caused an electric commotion in the audience. For an instant, they caught a glimpse of the truth, as though in a flash of lightning. But darkness descended upon the court room once more, and grew thick within even the most perspicacious minds.



There were not lacking some who muttered that priests, however wicked they may be, always have these words on their lips. The president answered him with his customary accuracy. "Good; God will judge hereafter, for the present, we will pronounce judgment on you."



## XV.

THE tribunal of men condemned him to fourteen years, eight months, and one day of imprisonment.

The official of the court who went to read his sentence to him in jail, felt it incumbent upon him to lavish consolation upon him. The case was not desperate. The Supreme Court might yet break the sentence. If this did not happen, he was still young and would certainly return from prison, above all when the rebates of time which the government grants now and then were taken into consideration, and so forth, and so forth.

"Thanks, thanks, sir," said the priest, whose face expressed a profound calm, a deep serenity which arrested the attention. "You think me very unhappy, do you not?"

"Very, you inspire me with great pity," replied the official of the court with a face of compunction.

"So that you would not change places with me at this moment?"

The official made a grimace of amazement.

"Unfortunately—you will understand. It's a terrible case!"

Father Gil continued to gaze steadfastly at him for a moment, with a gentleness which was not exempt from pity, and finally said, as he laid his hand on the man's shoulder :



“Then you would do badly, sir, you would do badly. You might well give your liberty, your honor, your position, and your family, to find yourself in the state which I am in. And you would still be the winner to an enormous extent.

The official stared at him in stupor. A gleam of uneasiness flashed through his eyes; he was afraid that he had to do with a madman, and he made haste to take leave and quit the room.

The priest was left alone. The cell was dark and dirty. An iron bedstead, a small pine table, a shabby chest of drawers, a few straw-seated chairs composed the entire furniture. Through the one grated window which lighted it, and opened high up in the wall, a sheaf of sun rays entered at that moment. After standing motionless for a moment, in a pensive attitude, Father Gil walked over and placed himself in these rays. His blond head, suddenly illuminated, shone with golden reflections, his white skin acquired singular transparency. His fine, thin body, clad in a black cassock, seemed a column of ebony destined to sustain that head.

He allowed himself to be inundated by the warm flood, drinking in its sweetness, palpitating under its caress like a captive bird. He raised his eyes to the window. Between the bars he saw the blue of the firmament, transparent, infinite, inviting one to fly through it.

The heavens smiled. But more joyously than the heavens smiled his soul, inundated with intoxicating delight. The infinite azure gleamed in the depths of his being. Since Grace had visited him,



he had dwelt in a perpetual festival. His eyes, abruptly illuminated, contemplated the universe in its ideal nature. All the veils stretched by reason had fallen to the ground, the great secret of existence had revealed itself to him directly, with admirable clearness and purity.

Behind this apparent life which surrounds us, he beheld the real life, infinite life, and entered into it, his heart swelling with joy. In that infinite life all is love, or what is the same thing, all is bliss. To enter into it is to set one's foot in the empire of eternity. It is the life of the Spirit. The world cannot change it, nor can time destroy it, since it is the very principle of time and of the world. He tasted life in God; he dwelt beyond time in the very ideal and perennial fountain of the imaginative world, which surrounds us. His days did not slip past, sad and anxious, as a portion of time. He no longer suffered the torment of his will; he did not breathe forth pitiful complaints over his sins, his vanquished resolutions, for he no longer loved his own works, however poor they might be, as heretofore, but the Eternal only. For works have their origin in the person, and he had got rid of his; he had denied it with firmness. He let God work within his spirit amid a holy and sweet indifference. Forever released from doubt and uncertainty, he knew that he had, henceforth, but one thing to desire, and that all the rest would be added to him. He was sure that the fountain of divine love which had sprang up in him would never run dry, and that that love would guide him eternally.



The fear of destruction by death no longer disturbed him. Death had become incomprehensible to him since he had entered into the life of eternity. He did not need to descend to the tomb to obtain that eternal life. It was sufficient to unite himself to God in his heart, in order to possess it and enjoy it.

He had discovered, in short, once for all, that man cannot save himself from pain and death by reason, but by faith, that is, by a consciousness distinct from and superior to that which reason can give us. As soon as this consciousness illuminated his spirit, he had attained absolute felicity. Without uneasiness as to the future, with feeling for the past, craving nothing, refusing nothing, his life, for some time past, had flowed by like a happy dream, like a sweet intoxication. He let fall the load of desires, and the sorrows which bound him to the earth. Freed from all illusions and from all efforts, without fears of annihilation or egotistical hopes of resurrection, by the virtue of faith and love, had he discovered how to produce in his soul the real kingdom of God.

He remained thus motionless, receiving the warm kiss of the star of day only for a few moments. He speedily said to himself that this was an enjoyment of the senses, and with a gesture of disdain, he went away and seated himself in the darkest corner of the chamber. Only by renouncing pleasures, only by seeking suffering and ruling over his feelings, had he aimed at the state of beatitude, of sublime indifference.

"Why do I need the rays of this sun," he said to himself, "if the fire which burns within my soul warms



and comforts me better? What avails this ephemeral light, compared with that other which will never be obscured? To live in the life of the senses is to be a slave of time and necessity. All that pertains to the free and internal being which I have succeeded in finding within me, is strange and indifferent. Oh, no! I will no longer tremble like a slave. I possess the consciousness of my liberty. I have no need to die to recover it. This sentiment of my liberty fills me with delight, I am emancipated and bear imprinted in my soul the seal of my God. Nothing that happens, nothing that will happen, can change the peace of my heart. The pulse of my inward life will beat with the same force until the hour for leaving this world shall strike. I have eaten the flesh and drunk the blood of the Redeemer, and according to His promises I dwell in Him and He dwells in me. I am a child of eternity. I have entered into the inheritance of my Father, and no one, no one shall wrest it from me!"

The bolt on the door rattled noisily. The jailer appeared, a bulky man with a red face, sensual eyes, dirty, greasy garments, and around his prominent stomach a broad leather belt garnished with keys. Without saying "good-day" or making the slightest sign of courtesy, he turned his face to the passage, saying:

"Come in, gentlemen, come in."

Behind him appeared two gentlemen in frock coats and round hats. One was tall, blond, with a long beard which reached half-way down his chest, with a frank and sympathetic countenance; he was



still young. The other, who was shorter and more slender, was of sickly complexion, and had beard and spectacles. The first was a distinguished physician of the town. The second, a jurist greatly devoted to penal studies, who had already published several monographs referring to them.

Father Gil rose when he saw them. They saluted him courteously, though they did not offer to shake hands.

"Good ; I leave you here with the *pater*," said the jailer roughly. "Give me notice when you wish to come out," and he went away.

The lawyer advanced a pace toward the condemned man, and said to him with an amiable smile :

"We should like, if it would not inconvenience you, to put a few questions to you."

"I am at your service," replied the priest, fixing upon them a limpid gaze which thoroughly upset their equanimity.

The doctor also came forward, and pulling out his leather case, offered him a good cigar, at the same time asking :

"How goes it? Do they treat you well here?"

"Many thanks, I do not smoke. Yes, sir, they treat me well. There is more charity in prison than is ordinarily stated."

An animated conversation ensued. Both the lawyer and the physician strove to render it increasingly intimate and familiar, inquiring with interest into the details of his daily life. Then they passed on imperceptibly to questions concerning his



childhood, his first impressions of life, his education, and paused in particular over his young manhood. What had been his life in the seminary? Had he been fond of solitude? What illnesses had he had? They also informed themselves on certain details referring to his family. His mother's suicide attracted their attention in particular, and they entertained themselves for a long time by questioning him as to all he knew of the person who had given him birth. Finally, after a conversation of an hour, during which they had stared at him with the pertinacious persistency of a person who is going to buy an animal, the physician said:

"Will you now permit us to take some data concerning your skull and other measures?"

Father Gil, though somewhat surprised, immediately consented. The doctor drew from the rear pocket of his coat a craniometer and a tape measure.

He took the dimension of his skull in circumference, then that of the osseous case which protects the brain, that of the facial angle, the length of his face; he measured the facial and parietal projection, the zygomatics, and the jaw.

On arriving at this point, lawyer and doctor exchanged a rapid and significant glance.

"Do us the favor to extend your arms?"

Father Gil assumed the attitude of the cross, while a gentle and melancholy smile hovered on his lips. They measured the length of his arms. Then that of his hands. At this point the physician and jurist exchanged another glance of intelligence.



At last, as soon as they had found out all that they wished, they took a very courteous leave of him, thanking him greatly for his amiability and trying to encourage him with good arguments.

On the following day there appeared in *The Future of Lancia*, signed by the criminal lawyer, an article entitled: "A visit to Father Gil." It contained an exact report of the interview, described minutely the person of the condemned priest, and ended with a series of profound scientific reflections concerning the anatomical, pathological, and physiological character presented by the delinquent.

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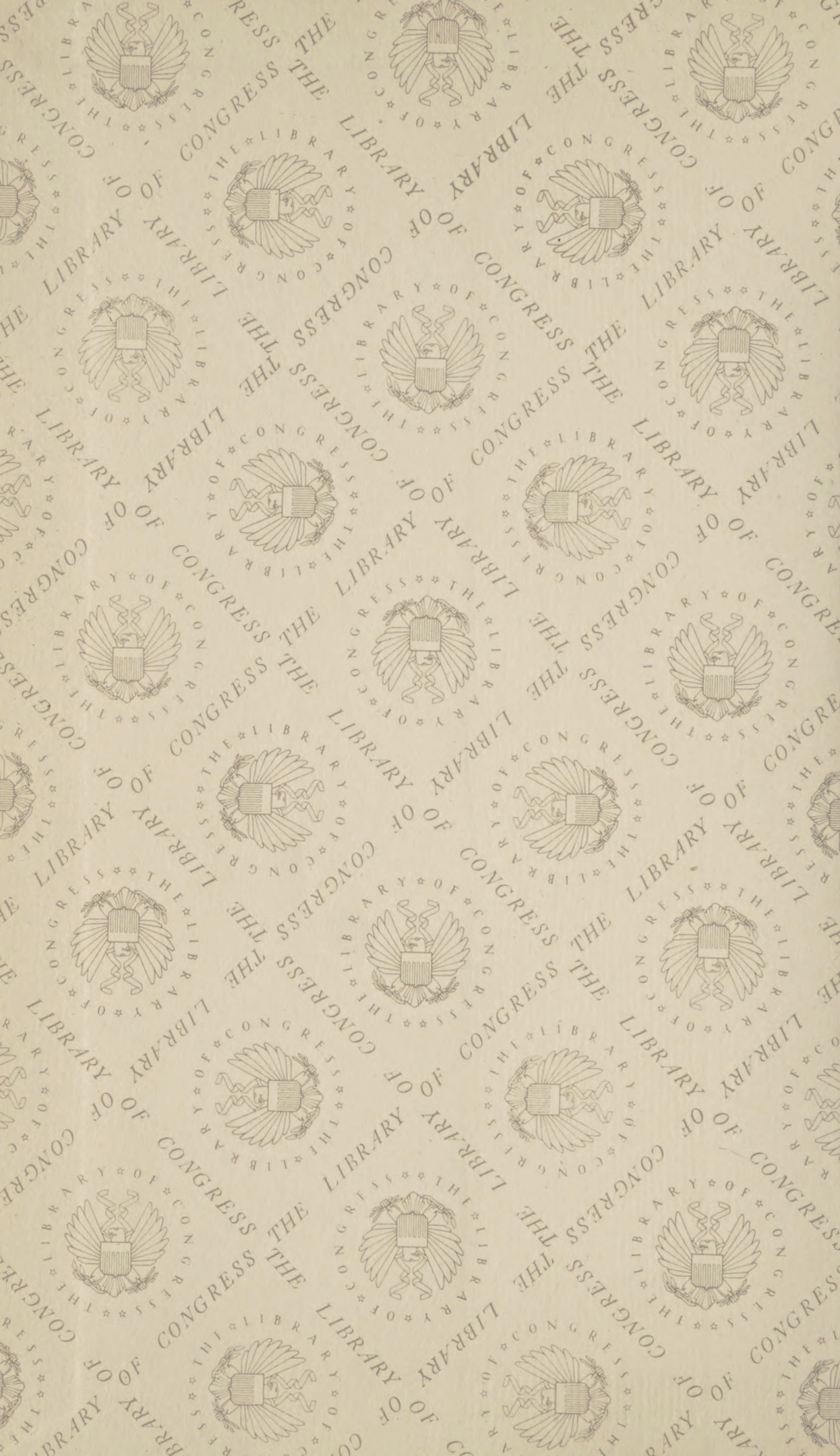


















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